

# A Family Legacy

By Amy McIntosh

Family-owned dealership puts customers first

**T**he story of Pristine Water Treatment in Stafford, Va., begins with a postcard.

In the early 1970s, Electrolux salesman Dan Hager received a postcard in the mail soliciting water treatment dealers in Virginia. After contacting the company, Dan went to work the next day, going door-to-door selling RainSoft equipment.

“He went out and made all kinds of sales. He came home and threw a wad of cash on the table and told my mom that he was going to like this business,” said Michelle Hager, Dan’s daughter and co-owner of Pristine.

Dan opened his own RainSoft dealership in 1974 and enlisted the help of his family to run the business. Michelle started working for her father as a telemarketer at the age of 16. By 18, she was placed in a management position, in charge of the entire marketing department.

Roy Hager, Michelle’s brother and business partner, was riding with Dan to service calls by the time he was 10. Roy sold his first piece of water equipment at 15.

“Dad was the salesman,” Michelle said. “He was the main breadwinner for the business. My brother did the service and installation and I did the office end of things.”

In 2009, Dan became ill and was bedridden for 10 months.

“Roy and I had a real quick adventure in front of us to grasp everything,” Michelle said. “It was a real struggle and a real learning experience for Roy and I, because even though we weren’t the dealer, we were acting as the dealer.”

Dan died in April 2010, leaving the family business in the hands of Michelle and Roy.

“I remember one time we were having lunch and he was all teary eyed and worried about where we would end up if something happened to him,” Michelle said. “I looked at him and told him, ‘Dad, you’ve already built a legacy. You’ve invested 35-plus years of your life. If something happens to you, Roy and I don’t have any other choice but to carry it on. It’s all we know.’”

Michelle and Roy opened Pristine Water Treatment in March 2011,

becoming distributors of Entek products. The new company serves mostly residential customers, although it continues to serve the commercial accounts that Dan started years ago. After some downsizing, the company now has a small staff, consisting of Michelle, Roy and a service manager who handles all customer service calls.

## A Changing Landscape

Having been with the company since she was a teenager, Michelle has witnessed a marketing revolution. When she entered the business, her father was performing water tests door to door. She was telemarketing, making phone calls to every homeowner in the area. Now, the company uses the Internet for most of its marketing. According to Michelle, Web marketing services and customer review websites have contributed to Pristine’s success, with the company averaging two to three leads a day from some form of Internet marketing.

“The customers now come to us instead of us having to come to them,” she said.

The passing of time also has led to more informed customers, according to Roy. “The concerns have increased,” he said. “More people are becoming aware. With the Internet, people are able to find equipment and find dealers.”

Using chemical-free systems, Pristine is able to address water concerns by offering products that remove chemicals from water instead of adding them. According to Roy, the electronic capabilities that are now being offered make owning a treatment system more convenient than in the past, eliminating the need for battery backups and allowing customers to control multiple units with one control panel.

Changes in the economy have caused Michelle and Roy to tailor their services around the needs of their customers. Pristine’s website boasts that the company services all makes and models of water treatment equipment, and it means it.

“Right now, with the way the economy is, everyone is looking for the best product for the cheapest price,” Michelle said. “That’s what we try to do.” The company offers used and

refurbished equipment at a discounted rate and also accepts trade-ins.

“This is something that has been a lifetime of work and effort for Roy and I, and we simply want to take care of our customers and make sure that they’re happy, even if we have to bend over backward,” Michelle said. She added that they generally present customers with three options every time they visit a home, allowing customers to choose the solution that best fits their present needs.

“Dad always said that if you take care of your customers, your customers will take care of you,” Michelle said.

## Looking Ahead

Michelle believes that success in today’s water treatment market can be achieved by proceeding cautiously and listening to customers.

“One day at a time. Right now, not everybody’s looking for water treatment. Everyone is a lot more conscious of what they’re spending,” Michelle said. “Pay attention to what your customer is asking for. Take every opportunity that you can to survive through this economy.”

Looking forward, Michelle said she and Roy would like to be able to hire more employees, open another office and take on more commercial accounts, but she plans to do it carefully and follow her own advice.

“I don’t like to put the cart before the horse,” she said. “Right now we’re just taking it day by day.”

Whatever the future holds for Pristine Water Treatment, the legacy Dan built almost 40 years ago is safe in the hands of his children, who are happy to carry on the tradition.

“This is all I know. This is what I love. It helps me keep a part of my daddy with me,” Roy said. “Some people still remember when my dad sold them the equipment, so it’s cool to hear those stories. I’m enjoying the ride.” *wqp*

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Top: Brother-and-sister team Michelle and Roy took over the family business in 2011. Bottom: The service truck touts some of Pristine’s Internet marketing initiatives, which bring in several leads per day.