

DEALER OF THE MONTH

By Michael Meyer

Spanning Generations

Missouri family dealership celebrates a half-century of success

For 50 years, the people and businesses of St. Joseph, Mo., have relied on the Cunning family and its company, CVB Water Doctor, to provide them with water treatment services. Today, the company continues to grow and prosper, and it aspires to continue this success for generations to come.

Taking the Leap

Ivan Cunning initially became aware of water conditioning products because several of his 10 children had sensitive skin that was aggravated by untreated water. He began a career in direct sales of water treatment equipment, but a run-in with his boss inspired him to establish his own dealership. Ivan and his wife, Velma, founded the Water Doctor in October 1966.

“Dad worked for another company out of Kansas City, and a guy shorted him \$100,” said Larry Cunning Sr., Ivan’s son and current president of CVB Water Doctor. “He took exception to that, and the guy said, ‘Take it or leave it. What are you going to do, start your own company?’ And by golly, in 1966 he took that opportunity. About five years after that, we took over the accounts of the guy who shorted Dad the \$100.”

The company initially was run out of the Ivan’s and Velma’s home, with the family station wagon doubling as its service vehicle. Before long, the Water Doctor had outgrown the house, and today it occupies 3 acres and several buildings on St. Joseph’s business loop. In 1998, the company name was changed to honor Velma by adding her initials, CVB, to it.

“I’m almost certain that in the first three months of this year, we’ll probably outperform last year completely, and last year we outperformed the year before,” Larry said. “We’ve always had constant growth, sometimes to the point where we actually had to slam on the brakes and slow it down a little bit so we could keep up with it.”

The Long Run

Developing long-lasting relationships with customers and their families has been a key to the company’s success.

“When we sell a machine, we look for repeat business, but not from them so much as from their kids and their kids’ kids,” Larry said. “In our



The Cunning family has owned and operated CVB Water Doctor since its inception. Today it employs family members (from left) Joey Evans, Larry Cunning Sr., Mike Cunning and Larry Cunning Jr.



Left: Though it is an independent dealership, CVB Water Doctor has primarily been a Hellenbrand distributor for more than 30 years. Right: The company’s fleet provides service to the St. Joseph, Mo., area.



region here, we have such a vast array of different water problems that most people need someone at their doorstep ... walking them through what is recommended for the long haul. And we don’t mean something that will last four or five years—we mean something we expect will last 15 to 25 years, easily.”

The water of the St. Joseph area, which is located on the Missouri-Kansas border approximately 55 miles north of Kansas City, provides CVB Water Doctor employees plenty of opportunities to engage with customers.

“We have some of the worst water you can find anywhere of any kind,” Larry said. “A lot of sulfur, a lot of high hardness—115- to 120-grain

hardness—and up to 40 ppm of iron. We've gotten very good at not only fixing it, but also standing by our customers' sides and making sure that they're not left out in the dark trying to make these things work."

A Family Affair

Family has been a crucial part of CVB Water Doctor since its inception. Ivan's and Velma's children (and their children) were consistently a part of the business in its formative years. After Velma's death in 2004 (Ivan passed away in 1997), Larry and his wife, Peggy, purchased the company from the other nine siblings. Today, CVB Water Doctor employs six members of the Cunning family: Larry, his sons Larry Jr. and Mike, his stepson Joey Evans, Larry Jr.'s wife Becky and Mike's wife Karrie.

Not that Larry Sr. takes it easy on his employees simply because they are family members. He is in his fourth term as president of the Missouri Water Quality Assn. (a position Ivan also held), and he values the credibility provided by association certification. He even has instituted an incentive program at CVB Water Doctor that encourages his employees to advance their water quality expertise.

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“For every level they pass and maintain, I give them a weekly bonus on their check, payable at the end of the year,” Larry Sr. said. “Three of us in our group are Master Water Specialists, and one is a [Certified Water Specialist]. When you add that up at the end of the year at around Christmastime, that’s a healthy little check. Plus it gives them confidence knowing they passed these tests and know what they’re talking about.”

This commitment to quality helps ensure that generations of customers in and around St. Joseph will receive expert service from the Cunning family and CVB Water Doctor for years to come.

“I took a machine out from a customer—my son sold it, and I went with him to change it, and that machine was 47 years old,” Larry Sr. said. “The owner of the dairy farm asked me if I remembered this place. I said, ‘Vaguely.’ He said, ‘Well, my dad

said you probably wouldn’t because you were 18 when you put it in.’ And I’m 66 now.” **WQP**

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