

Education, Consultation & a Dream

Connecticut startup gains following through customer appreciation & involvement

By Bob Crossen

During childhood, many dream of becoming a police officer or firefighter. Others want to follow in their parents' footsteps or aspire to be professional athletes. Most kids do not dream about owning water treatment dealerships, though. But for Bennett & Cole Water Solutions owners Jim Bennett and James Colasante, realizing this dream as adults has led to fulfillment and success.

"[We're] two knuckleheads who are really good at that, and pretty much only that," Colasante said. "Water is going to become the oil of the 21st century. It's going to become the commodity that everybody is going to need, and there's not going to be enough of clean, drinkable, potable water."

Colasante loves the customer service aspect of the business, while Bennett cannot get enough of the mechanics involved in finding solutions to a client's water problem. Their company, Bennett & Cole Water Solutions, will celebrate five years of business in 2016, and Colasante said he attributes the company's success to its customer service.

Case for Comfort

Whether the call comes in the middle of the workday or at 3 a.m., Colasante said he makes it a point to answer every customer in three hours or less.

"People panic when they have limited access to good water. It's something that makes people very nervous, so when somebody gets up in the middle of the night and flushes and there's no water, they get distraught quickly," Colasante said.

Customers often are not educated about water contaminants and treatment concerns. As news reports are released in the wake of the water crisis in Flint, Mich., Colasante said residents just want to feel at ease with their home water systems. Education quickly can assuage any worries a customer has.

"They're worried about whatever the media is screaming about this month, and that's really where our consultative approach helps them the most," Colasante said. "Our industry [has been] plagued with people selling through fear for years, and it is a real problem. We spend a lot of time teaching people about water to make them less afraid."

Education also gives a household greater ownership of its water and a deeper understanding of its usage. One family was regularly running out of water from its well, a problem Colasante said many families face but are unsure how to address. He installed a water harvesting system to draw water while the family slept and store it for the following day. By morning, transparent tanks in the basement were visibly full, which reassured the family and encouraged them to better gauge their water usage.

More Usage Than Ever Before

Not all homes are as critical of their water use. Households of four can use 400 gal of water daily, and Colasante said that amount is staggeringly different from his youth.

"I'm blown away by how much water some of my customers use," Colasante said. "When I was a kid, if I took a 30-minute shower, after about 10 minutes, my father



Bennett & Cole Partner Jim Bennett operates a pump on a residential work site.



Jim Bennett, left, and Jeff Colasante, right, spend little on marketing, opting instead to gain clients through word of mouth.

would just shut the water off. It was over. Boom. Water stopped and I was sitting there with a head of shampoo.”

In areas like California or the Southwest, where water is at a premium, families have that attitude of conservation. But in the Northeast, water is still plentiful and many take it for granted. There is an expectation of immediacy and abundance, which Colasante said is a product of the internet era.

Those cultural attitudes are a driving force behind his customer service model to respond in three hours or less, and texting has become the main form of communication with clients.

“Everybody is super busy. They don’t have a lot of time, so I’m communicating with my customers pretty much all evening long because that’s when most of them are responding or getting home to find out what happened,” Colasante said.

Evolution & Industry Trends

Water treatment equipment has not had a major breakthrough in many years, Colasante said. Water softeners and well pumps are largely the same as they were decades

ago. Customers are following some trends, however, as fewer clients are installing chlorination systems, opting instead for ultraviolet treatment. There also are frequent requests for more efficient products.

“They like the idea of not having a chemical injected into their water,” Colasante said. “[They want] metered systems where the usage of salt is much more efficient. It’s not that they’re using less water, they just want to maximize the consumable portion of their treatment to accommodate this big usage.”

As more people track their water usage, Colasante said communicating finer details and data to customers will be the future. Much like the smart thermostats making waves in the housing market, households will want access to their water data, too, especially homes with private wells.

Colasante and his company provide the key to the water information gate. And he regularly hands it over because education is the cornerstone of his business philosophy. **WQP**

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