

Modernizing a Legacy

By Abby Kleckler

Southeast Texas Water's new family owners look to technology to streamline their business

Matt and Catherine Gilby purchased Southeast Texas Water in January 2011, and with the new adventure came old ties.

Catherine is carrying on the legacy of her grandparents, H.D. "Tex" and Emma Strait, who moved to Beaumont, Texas, 45 years ago to purchase a Culligan business. Tex's middle son, Henry Strait, and his wife, Fran, then purchased Southeast Texas Water from his parents in 1994, and now it is Henry's daughter's turn to run the business with her husband.

Southeast Texas Water specializes in both residential and commercial/industrial water treatment and bottled water, with 18 year-round employees.

Realizing a Future in Water

After working at Southeast Texas Water during summers and school breaks, Catherine said she did not see herself taking over the family business.

"I would help out in the office, filing or stamping letters, highlighting route calendars and other clerical tasks," she said. "My brothers were more involved out in the plant and would ride



Matt and Catherine Gilby purchased Southeast Texas Water from Catherine's parents in 2011, making them the third generation of the Strait family to run the dealership.

with the drivers and help bottle water."

Both Catherine's brothers chose different career paths, and she earned her degree in accounting, went on to work in Houston as a CPA and married Matt, also an accountant.

The birth of their daughter in 2010 put buying the business back on their radar.

"Growing up, I remember my dad was always available for me and my brothers, whether it be attending sporting events or school plays or simply being home for dinner," Catherine said. "We also experienced that flexibility with my mom when she began working in the business after my younger brother started school."

In late 2010, Matt and Catherine made the move from

Houston to Beaumont and began the process of purchasing Southeast Texas Water from her parents in hopes of finding a better work-life balance.

Updating Technology

Updating Southeast Texas Water's Web presence and office technology were the first things on the Gilbys' agenda.

"Many people are turning to online resources and want information very quickly. They make decisions based on online reviews and search data," Matt said. "We wanted to make sure we were not missing out on these buyers."

On the company's updated website, customers have a place to pay their bills, check when their routes are running and request service if needed.

The business also increased its online advertising and began using tools such as Google AdWords to generate new leads.

"Word of mouth and our reputation in the community are likely what drive the bulk of our leads, but we do get a significant amount of lead generation through the Internet," Matt said.

He also spent his first few years at Southeast Texas Water researching and



One of the Gilbys' top priorities was increasing Southeast Texas Water's Web presence. On the company's updated website, customers can pay bills, request service and more.



testing new software that could replace the company's paper- and spreadsheet-heavy system. After looking at more than 15 options, he said he has found the perfect one.

"It's called GBC Routing, and I think it will revolutionize the way we do business," he said. "Everything is done on handheld. There's no paper anymore; it's all digital. We can send work orders, service orders and customer service requests through the Internet to the guys in the field, who all have Android phones."

The software, originally designed for the ice and bottled water industries, will be a driving force in the dealership's continued growth, according to Matt.

"The system is almost instantaneous and the efficiencies really will save us money just from interacting with our customers and the number of people that we need on staff to do what we have historically done," he said.

Knowing Who You Are

Tex Strait was one of the founding members of the Texas Water Quality Assn. (TWQA), and today TWQA membership is still important to Catherine and Matt.

"TWQA is very helpful and has a lot of resources that an independent dealer may not have," Matt said. "It's a place where all the people who are in the same industry can have a way of getting together and sharing ideas."

Southeast Texas Water also belongs to other organizations, such as the International Bottled Water Assn. and the Culligan Dealers Assn. of North America, to name a few.

With such a large number of key players in the water industry, one of the biggest challenges is figuring out who you are and what you are providing, according to Matt.

"There are so many big box competitors out there and low-cost water treatment systems that it's very easy to get caught up in trying to compete with those units and systems," he said. "We really try to offer a full-service solution to water treatment—we want people to be our customers for a lifetime, not a one-time job."

Continuing to Grow

The company's emphasis on service, along with the water itself, have helped Southeast Texas Water stay strong during the recession, according to Matt.

"We primarily deal with problem water in our market," he said. "Probably part of the reason why the downturn in the economy didn't

impact us as much is because the water is truly either undrinkable or unusable in some cases."

The local groundwater typically has high levels of hydrogen sulfide and iron content that must be treated.

At a solid place with a family foundation, new technology and a focus

on service, Southeast Texas Water is looking forward.

"We're always looking at expanding to the extent that we can make acquisitions of bottled water or water companies," Matt said. "That's what our future looks like if we can identify targets that make sense to us." *wqp*

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