

Mike's Carwash

History of Teamwork Continues

By Matt Ottinger

Upon entering the support office of Mike's Carwash in Fort Wayne, the city in which the company began in 1948, I'm quickly greeted by examples of its founders' top three priorities:

1. **God** – crosses, religious symbols and a sign reading "Smile, God Loves You" adorn the wall
2. **Family** – founders Joe and Ed Dahm, along with Joe's son and current president/owner Mike, warmly receive me with handshakes
3. **Work** – pictures and signage from the nearly seven decades of business depict the evolution of this industry archetype

Joe explains the company was founded with \$35,000 in seed money from their father. Joe left his academic life as a sophomore at Indiana University to pursue the opportunity, launching Mike's Minit Man (named after Joe and Ed's younger brother).

"Gasoline on the corner was 29 cents per gallon, the Minit Man wage was 75 cents an hour and a full service car wash was \$1.50," recalls Joe, noting the full-service car wash was the first of its kind in Indiana and the 18th in the United States.

Mike's second location wasn't built until 1971. But two governing mantras launched the company's enduring success: "The customer is the boss," and "treat your team members like family."

Mike's Carwash split into two businesses (Mike's Carwash and Crew Carwash) in 2014 as part of a friendly reorganization to enhance family succession planning. Mike now leads Mike's Carwash with 17 locations and 350 employees in Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky, while his brother Bill oversees Crew's operations in Central Indiana.

Empower the people

Mike's Carwash earned its spot on the Best Places to Work in Indiana list (it has received similar recognition in Ohio) largely because of its attitude toward its associates. Team members are granted a great deal of latitude to help satisfy customers if problems or opportunities arise, and the company leans on staff to offer opinions and feedback that enhance the customer experience.

This is evidenced while talking to managers— in between the steady stream of soiled vehicles passing through on a delightful March afternoon – at its Jefferson Street operation in Fort Wayne.

"They really listen to their people," relays Ron Russell, district manager. "They know we're on the front lines, so they take our ideas to make it a better experience. That's one of the reasons I'm here."

Russell's badge reveals he's been with the company for 26 years, although he qualifies the number is actually 28. Ten-year veteran Ron Haller, general manager, came to the company after working in restaurant management because he wanted more family-friendly hours. The career shift has been well worth it, and he relishes the opportunity to spend time with his co-workers.

"The caliber of people we work with is great," Haller notes. "(The company is) very selective in the hiring process, so you work with really good people. I also like the mix of the job. I get to dabble in some maintenance responsibilities, as well as help serve customers."

But not every associate has a family. In fact, many are students,



Chains no longer pull cars through the wash as they did in 1948. The company, however, remains linked to the mantra – "The customer is the boss" – of its founders, Joe and Ed Dahm. Joe's son Mike (center) now keeps the company on track as president.

which makes its college reimbursement program (paying up to \$2,500 per year) so appealing, not to mention its bonus opportunities.

“A lot of times, they don’t think of Mike’s as a career,” Mike Dahm points out. “But they get in, they like the way they’re treated and the training they receive. And they’ll go to school, but then decide to get into management at Mike’s. They may graduate and stay with us, and move up the ladder.”

Gaining with training

Preparing its team to succeed is a focus at Mike’s. This is done through a rigorous process, although the current owner notes, “We try to keep it fun and interactive as well.”

“We have one of the best training programs in the nation,” Ed Dahm asserts, likening it to the highly-respected customer service program used by Disney Institute. “If someone walks in for a job, we don’t just send them out to start working. He or she goes through a couple weeks of training.”

The company offers classroom and on-the-job instruction, and its managers often work alongside trainees.

“We just had a dinner meeting with about 60 people who used to work for us in Fort Wayne,” Ed regales. “They hadn’t worked at Mike’s in a long time, but they went around the room and told us what they liked about Mike’s. They said they loved what they were doing now, and our training put them in the top notch of the next field they went into.”

You’d better recognize

Team members are rewarded with outings like an annual picnic at King’s Island or a yearly awards dinner honoring its Associates of the Year. Bowling and other staff outings enhance the team atmosphere, as do efforts to help workers maintain a work/life balance.

“We’ve reduced the hours of workloads and give our managers every other weekend off,” Mike Dahm comments. “We do that for recruiting. That’s why it’s great getting these awards because when they come out of college, people are looking at those Best Places to try to work.”

That recruitment is critical, he explains, because the company is growing. That expansion is maximized by the startling fact that the business has never closed a location due to low revenue in its nearly seven decades – and Mike’s washed its 100 millionth vehicle in 2012.

Giving back is also a way the company



Mike’s Carwash “goes big” when it comes to helping Big Brothers Big Sisters and other organizations in the communities it serves.



The customer may be the boss, but sometimes the boss is a customer too. President/owner Mike Dahm gets a spring cleaning for his vehicle on a sunny day in Fort Wayne.

uses its good fortune to honor God and the communities it serves.

“We gave a check to Big Brothers Big Sisters this past spring for over \$73,000,” Mike offers. “We give to the YMCA and we offer free car washes for veterans on Veterans Day. We also let Girls Scouts and Boy Scouts sell car washes door to door, and they keep half the proceeds.”

The company also donates \$1 to the Cincinnati Reds Community Fund for every Ultimate Wash purchased on Wednesdays after a Reds’ win, and it enlists fundraising coordinators to aid smaller organizations.

Leadership hopes to continue its winning

ways for many years, and the founders speak with obvious pride as they discuss its distinguished history. In fact, rumor is the Dahm brothers can still be found occasionally walking the grounds, picking up papers and cigarette butts to keep the locations as clean as the cars they service – and as tip-top as their well-trained associates, who don shirts and ties each day.

“When Ed and I stepped down a few years ago, a fellow came up to me and said he’d heard I’d retired,” Joe relays. “I said, ‘How can I retire? I never worked.’ If you like what you’re doing, it doesn’t feel like work.”

RESOURCES: Mike’s Carwash at www.mikescarwash.com