

# Women Pull Their Weight In Janitorial Supply Firm

By LINDA GILLIS

About 10 minutes into a very lively business transaction, the customer decided something wasn't quite right.

While the salesman was competent enough and extremely knowledgeable about the products and their functions, the man felt slightly insulted that he was not dealing with the boss. After all, he was the head of a very important company.

"Excuse me, but can I talk to the man in charge?" inquired the voice over the telephone.

"You are talking to 'him,'" answered the warm, authoritative voice of Linda Lytle Mohlenhoff.

Last January, Ms. Mohlenhoff became the fourth owner of Albert G. Maas Chemicals and Supplies Co., a janitorial supply company first established in 1916 by an Indianapolis pharmacist.

Every day she is surrounded by more than 700 cleaning items ranging from domestic mops and brooms to industrial strength insecticides and wax buffers.

"When I was in college, I never dreamed I would be involved in this kind of business — much less owning one," she said with a laugh. "It didn't exactly fit the glamorous image I had in mind."

Glamorous or not, Ms. Mohlenhoff sees a lot of security and growth potential in the janitorial supply business and a terrific opportunity to test her leadership skills.

"Few companies as old as this one made it through the Depression. This company survived because people need these products no matter what the state of the economy," she said.

"People often ask me why I got into this. Well, the owners were selling, the price was right and I knew the business and liked it. It was as simple as that."

Ms. Mohlenhoff first was introduced to the janitorial supply business when she took a summer job with Maas Chemicals and Supplies during high school. A year after she graduated, a sales position opened up at the company. She took it. She



Linda Mohlenhoff

decided this would give her practical experience in business she could use after she finished college.

"From there I learned every aspect of the business," she said. "I felt it was important to learn it from the bottom up, especially if I ever decided to go into management."

Learning every aspect of the business included installing and servicing equipment in restaurants, hospitals and universities — jobs her former employers were not very thrilled to give a woman.

"People are always amazed when Linda whips out a screwdriver from one of the pockets of her three-piece suit and starts repairing or installing equipment," said Pam Pearson, 24, one of three women working for Ms. Mohlenhoff.

Customers discover that the women at the supply company are full of surprises. While they may dress for success, they also can pull more than their weight when necessary.

"I remember the time Sally was carrying a 50-pound box like it weighed about 5 and a customer ran to help her," Ms. Pearson said with a giggle. "He took it from her and nearly buckled under the weight."

Sally Vargus, 25, smiled, shrugged her shoulders and offered a tale of her own.

"One day a guy from IUPUI came to pick up a 100-pound drum and had a hard time loading it in his truck," she said. "I just popped it right up into the back of his truck. He was kind of embarrassed."

The women don't do all their own lifting and loading.

Ms. Mohlenhoff hires brawny part-time help to handle supply shipments and finds many customers volunteer to do their own hauling. If companies do not have their own pickup and delivery service, she has her own delivery service to take care of matters.

With her new role as boss less than a year old, she has been delighted to discover that her "trimmed down, no frills" approach has worked so well.

"I was both shocked and thrilled to discover that 30 days after I had bought it, I had turned around a business that was going bankrupt and was showing a profit. I can definitely say that we have more sales this year than last, and we have taken on new customers."

Her employees said the work atmosphere has a lot to do with this success.

"Linda makes us feel that everything we do is important," Ms. Pearson said. "She just makes us want to do more. We realize that she knows all about the business and wants us to be aware of things too. We all get along very well. There is a lot of teamwork."

In addition to Ms. Pearson and Ms. Vargus, Ms. Mohlenhoff also employs her sister, Kathy Lytle and Dan Kibler, a 70ish go-getter who "knows the business backward and forward and who could sell anything that doesn't move first."

"Because we are a small staff, people know us when they come in or when we make the rounds at companies," Ms. Pearson said. "That makes it more personal. People call us by name and ask about what is happening in our lives."

So, when customers call up and ask for the person in charge, more than likely, they already have her on the line.