

Woman cleans up janitorial-supply company

Losing business now a winner

by Peter Fullam

It's leaking at the Hoosier Dome. They're getting wet in the museum under the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. Indianapolis' many other statues need protection from erosion. And the soon-to-be-constructed new Indianapolis Zoo has some rather unique drainage problems to face.

But what these and 52 other area concerns all have in common is their attendance last Tuesday of an industrial-coatings seminar. They came in hopes of finding solutions to some unique maintenance problems.

The seminar was sponsored by the Albert G. Maas Co., Indianapolis' oldest janitorial-supply company. The idea for the seminar was that of the company's new owner, 31-year-old Linda Lytle.

The industrial-coatings seminar is just one of a cornucopia of new management ideas Lytle has introduced since she acquired the company Jan. 1—and turned a loser into a winner.

This year, 10 months after taking the helm of Albert G. Maas, Lytle said annual sales will reach \$250,000. If she's right, it will be the first time in at least a decade that the fourth-largest janitorial-supply company in Indianapolis has recorded a profit.

Lytle said 1983's figures show an increase of approximately 20 percent over 1982 sales. But the real success has been her reorganization of the company.

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Janitorial-supplies entrepreneur Linda Lytle still believes in the traditional business value of hard work.



"I think sometimes when you work for your family, you have to prove yourself a lot harder."

southeast side of Indianapolis, Albert G. Maas Co. was founded in 1916. The first store was on Virginia Avenue near Railroadmen's Federal Savings and Loan Association.

In those days, Maas pushed a cart through old Indianapolis selling brooms, mops, cleansers and squeegees.

Lytle is the company's fourth owner, and

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English Avenue is its third location. Its second location was at East Maryland and Delaware streets.

Reflecting on the company's turnaround, Lytle said "common-sense" paring away of overhead expenses has been a key to her success.

"We were top-heavy. And there wasn't enough profit margin," she said.

Lytle said that Albert G. Maas Co. had five employees previously, and that it still does. But now, four of the employees are involved in sales.

"Some people try to judge a company by how many employees you have, without thinking of how we keep our overhead down to provide a product," Lytle said.

"You see," she continued, "I bought a company that was failing due to mismanagement."

Hmmm...sounds funny, considering that she purchased the business from her father, John Lytle, 54, and his partner, Jim Warner, 52.

The elder Lytle and Warner acquired Albert G. Maas Co. 10 years ago. Lytle said part of the problem they had showing a profit was having to buy out two other partners, one of whom died and left a widow and another who just wanted out.

Lytle and Warner also owned Titan Industries Inc., 323 S. LaSalle St., a chemical-coatings service with about 70 employees and between \$1.5 and \$2 million in annual sales.

"We couldn't remember the last time

load of products arrives, she uses temporary help.

"Nicer personalities" is another factor Lytle points to. "Sure, we're all women now," she says, although that's not quite accurate: Her staff consists of store manager Sally Vargas, 25, and sales reps Kathy Lytle, 24 (Lytle's sister), Pam Pearson, 24, and Daniel Kibler, 72.

Ironically, in view of her success, Lytle said the janitorial-supply business is one which has traditionally been considered a man's world. "I have guys that call on the phone and say 'Let me talk to the head man.'"

To which the Albert G. Maas staff typically responds, tongue-in-cheek, "Well, we'll let them know you called."

Lytle said her training in the janitorial-supply business began while she was a sophomore at Indiana University in Bloomington. During the summer, she worked at the shop. By the time she earned her degrees in real estate and marketing in 1975, she had a wealth of on-the-job training in the janitorial-supply business. She'd done the office work, sales and even service.

"I think sometimes when you work for your family, you have to prove yourself a lot harder," she said. "I was straight commission. And they didn't want me to get into service because they didn't think I could handle it. But I wanted to so I could know if somebody was goofing off."

She may get second looks now, showing

"Some people try to judge a company by how many employees you have, without thinking of how we keep our overhead down to provide a product."

Albert G. Maas Co.] showed a profit," said Lytle. "It was eating our lunch." because of the demands at Titan, Lytle and he and Warner couldn't devote enough time to the janitorial-supply company. And when Linda Lytle asked whether they'd be interested in selling the Maas company, it was a "take my business...please" sort of proposition.

"We would have lost \$50,000 this year," Lytle said.

To change that, Linda Lytle said she reorganized the company so that besides herself, there were three other sales reps and one store manager.

"It had had two partners, a full-time truck driver, a full-time manager and not enough sales," she said. "A lot of turning the business around was just common sense. It was internal problems."

Right away, Lytle said, she increased the company's stock. No more telling customers product wasn't in stock, "but we can order it for you."

She dumped the truck and now uses a delivery service. No more maintenance headaches, truck payments or workman's compensation.

She also added new product lines, improved service, increased store hours, added Saturday hours and got a computer. For those heavy jobs that occur when a truck-

up in jeans to service a dishwasher that needs a new solenoid. But she thinks she knows the business better for that.

And despite the impressions many of us may have when we think of the janitorial business, it's a business which has become increasingly technical.

All those company representatives who attended Albert G. Maas Co.'s seminar last week—the people from the Hoosier Dome, the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, the Indianapolis Parks and Recreation Department, the Indianapolis Zoo and the Indianapolis "500"—they all have specific, unique and sometimes complex problems involving industrial coatings.

Lytle's job is matching a customer's needs with the right product, which may be an epoxy adhesive mixed with fine silica aggregate that's unaffected by freeze, thaw, rain and sunlight. Or maybe the right product is a breather-type siliconized epoxy coating that hides imperfections, prevents blistering and can be used for smokestacks or non-skid floor coating around shower areas or tennis courts.

But whether or not the cocktail- and hors d'oeuvres-accented seminar boosts Albert G. Maas's sales, Lytle has already reached the quarter-million sales plateau, and wants a bigger slice of the pie.

Said father John Lytle, "There's only one way she could have gone." ●

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