

Service and Repeat Customers

Part 1

Over the next few months, as WC&P celebrates its 50th anniversary of publication excellence in 2009, this column will take a special look at some of the leading executives, companies and organizations of our industry. This month and next, we will focus on Vince Kent, President of Abendroth Water Conditioning and the pending 2009-2010 WQA President, in a two-part Executive Insight. Part one will focus on the past history of the company and part two on the future of the industry.

By Donald A. Mounce

solutions to some of the biggest Fortune 500 companies throughout the US.

"Being independent allows us to offer all of our customers the best in products and services available in today's market. We are not tied to one specific product or brand like most franchise dealers. We can provide our customers with the best product available to fit the customer's needs."

Getting started

The family-owned and operated business goes back to 1949 when Pat Abendroth sold his grocery store and started renting and selling water softeners out of the garage of his home in Fort Atkinson, WI. In 1953, he became incorporated and chose Lindsay as his product line. The business was operated by Pat and three employees for many years, including his wife Laila, their son Curtis and Gus Brokmeier.

The business continued with steady growth in the rental, sales and service of water treatment products. By 1967, he had built the present showroom and business office of Abendroth Water Conditioning.

In 1989, Curt Abendroth decided to terminate being a franchise dealer and became independent, renting, selling and servicing all makes and models of water softeners. The business started providing Fleck Controls as its main product line for their residential and commercial products.

By 1994, a new generation had arrived. Curt's daughter Linda and her husband Vince Kent joined the business, with Kent now serving as the President and Linda as the Treasurer.

More than a president

Vince Kent spent 13 years in the hotel management industry selling convention space to large and small corporate and association customers for meetings. He even remembers booking some WQA meetings!

Kent strongly believes that you cannot expect your team to do for you what you do not know how to do yourself. Over the past 15 years, he has become more than company President, even

While many have focused on size, Abendroth Water Conditioning has taken a different approach. They let the 'size' come to them by the way of service and repeat customers.

The new buzzword for that is 'WOM' or word-of-mouth marketing. And that has been standard fare at Abendroth for almost 60 years.

"We have watched as many have added more dealerships or extended their residential coverage area by hundreds of miles, only to find they are not be able to service them after the sale," according to Vince Kent, company President. "We maintain a healthy service area that can provide same-day service or same-day the customer requests.

"This has allowed us to give our customers the service they expect and deserve. And it is an area that others have failed to provide."

"We are fully engaged in all aspects of water and water treatment. We like to say that "This is our main line, not a sideline," notes Kent. "We offer complete sales, rental and service for residential, commercial and industrial water treatment products.

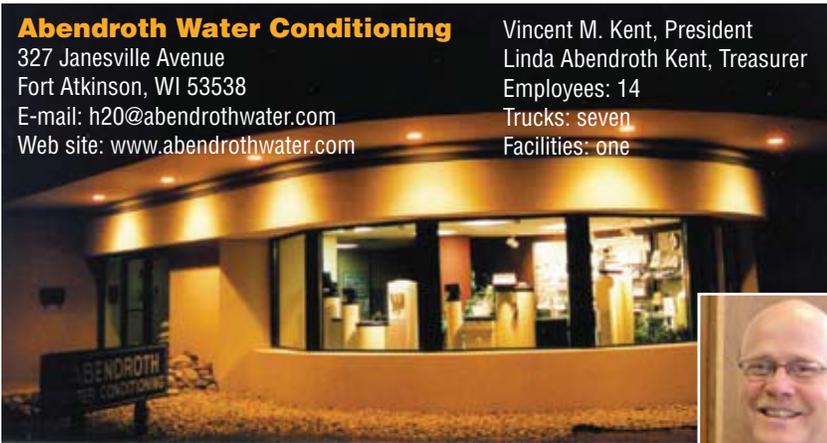
"We also offer well drilling, pump installation services and complete plumbing services. Basically we cover water from the ground to the tap and back down again."

"Our rapid business growth over the years has also allowed us to become a market leader in the commercial and industrial area," says Kent. "We provide water treatment needs and

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Employees: 14
Trucks: seven
Facilities: one



assisting in the writing of the new WQA *Commercial Plumbing, Sizing and Design Application* book.

"My father-in-law (Curt) was planning for his retirement and succession in the business while Linda and I were living in Maryland," says Kent. "Curt was either going to sell the dealership or try and have a family member come to work, learn the industry and take it over.

"We agreed to give it a three-year try and see how it worked. He mailed me the WQA Certified Water Specialist books before I even left Baltimore for Wisconsin. I think he knew it would be a great fit."

"Curt trained me the same way I learned the hotel management industry; starting at the bottom," says Kent. "With my sales experience, I needed to learn about what I was going to sell and how it operated.

"I started on the route trucks delivering salt and then moved into the shop tearing apart old retired units for scrap, as well as

rebuilding/repairing good units and learning how and why they operated."

"From there I took my CWS exam and passed that before I could sell the products," says Kent. "Now I needed to know how to install them and took my State of Wisconsin journeyman plumbers exam and passed that so I could start installing water treatment equipment. This led to a State of Wisconsin Master Plumber, CWS-I and CI certification.

"Only when I was fully cross-trained did I finally start selling water treatment products. To this day, this is the standard by which we train our staff. You need to start at the bottom and understand the industry before you can install, service or sell."



Maintaining focus

The company operates with the same basic mission it began with in 1949, which has changed only to match the growth of Abendroth Water Conditioning.

- Our trained team is committed to providing the highest level of service and products in the water treatment industry, with a high level of knowledge.
- We will not sacrifice quality of products or service for price.
- We will only sell or rent our customers products that meet their application and needs.
- We will be recognized within our market area(s) as the strongest water conditioning dealer by our customers, vendors and community.
- We will actively promote, invest and participate in our community and those communities in which we serve.

"Our goal remains to never forget what got us to the point of 55 years in business," notes Kent. "We are dependent on our customers; they are not dependent on us. We listen to them, act ethically and never promise what we can't deliver.

"Today's economy will dictate some interesting times. These times will present some good opportunities for our company to look at making an acquisition of another dealer or core business that will have a strong tie to our present business model."

"Abendroth Water is continuously on the lookout for expansion when the time is right," says Kent. "The economic downturn has provided some wonderful opportunities for acquisitions, while at the same time limiting the availability of financing and cash flow."

Next month—Part 2. ♦