

Company cleans up via a culture of innovation, problem-solving

Owner says focus is on the cleaning process.

By [Eric Schwartzberg](#), Staff Writer

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HAMILTON — Bob Robinson Sr., founder and president of Kaivac Cleaning Systems, is letting people in on a dirty little secret: solutions that promise fast-and-easy cleaning usually focus on chemicals and lose sight of the cleaning process itself.

It's a message the Butler County business has spread for more than a dozen years.

Robinson, a mechanical engineer by trade, sold cleaning supplies to businesses via his parents' company, Valley Janitor Supply Co.

During the 1990s, he started inventing products for the cleaning industry, where the No. 1 problem to solve is how to thoroughly clean and disinfect dirty restrooms.

In 1997, while demonstrating different bowl cleaners and Johnny Mops to several custodians while on his hands and knees in front of a toilet, Robinson figured there had to be a better way of cleaning.

He came up with No-Touch Cleaning Systems to be used by schools, businesses, universities, airports and other places that have large restrooms with a high volume of daily usage.

Initially producing the device under Valley Janitor Supply, Robinson split off and formed Kaivac Cleaning Systems in 1998, and took its production there.

The invention cleans not only restrooms, but has been enhanced to tackle nearly all surface and space throughout a facility, from walls, floors, restrooms and classrooms to kitchens, hallways, stairwells and more, the company said.

As a result, many customers use the device in place of mops and buckets, automatic scrubbers, carpet extractors, dry and wet vacuums and grout machines, he said.

The business outgrew its manufacturing site in 2008 but opted to stay local and moved those operations to a Hamilton facility about five miles away from its headquarters at 401 South Third St.

Kaivac has 45 employees and earns nearly \$11 million in total sales annually. By 2010, the company had shipped 35,000 No-Touch Cleaning machines.

Q: What are the goals of the company and how is it working to achieve those goals?

A: "Our primary goal right now it to launch our latest cleaning innovation: OmniFlex (Crossover

Cleaning Systems), a new invention designed to eliminate mops ... because mops do a lousy job of cleaning. They do a brilliant job of moving stuff around.”

“There’s a tremendous amount of grease on kitchen floors. Slipping is the No. 1 cause of going to the emergency room. The No. 1 cause of death for elderly people is complications from falling.”

Q: What are the biggest challenges facing the business today and why?

A: “I think the economy, in general, is very challenging right now. A lot of my current business is coming from public schools, grades K through 12, and universities, and with the economy stinking, with funding being reduced for K to 12 here in Ohio, there’s a financial crisis with our schools.

“That’s our primary marketplace now, but they’re all cutting back big time, even on their custodial budgets. So to grow your market, even when your primary marketplace is making major cutbacks, that’s a challenge a right there.”

Q: What have been keys to the company’s success over its history?

A: “We innovate, market and train complete cleaning systems. We’re continually coming up with new inventions. We’ve got a dozen patents and probably another dozen patents pending. We have a culture here of innovation, problem-solving. We’ve also got a great team of people here.”

Q: What do you feel your company does better than its competitors?

A: We innovate better. We come up with better ideas, better solutions to real problems. We’re science based. The cleaning industry has a history of selling snake oil and making wild claims about ‘this product is a miracle product. It cleans, disinfects and sanitizes’ but there’s no scientific background to that.”

“If there was any scientific basis, it was all done in a laboratory and not in the real world. We get into the real world with our processes and products and we validate and prove that under normal use it really does work, not just under a laboratory controlled situation.”

“We’ve found that the most important thing about cleaning is not the chemical, it’s the cleaning process.”

Q: Where do you see the company in 10 years?

A: “Our 10 year goal is to grow tenfold. If you do the math on that, that means we have to grow 26 percent per year. That is one of the things that we are focusing on right now: how are we going to do this? Because we know we have heightened ideas and innovations that the world needs. There’s a giant marketplace out there.”

Q: How is the company committed to the community?

A: “We hire from the community and we like to business locally whenever possible. We recently had a choice. (Our manufacturing facility was) busting at the seams so do we stay in Butler County or do we go another place in the world or do we stay in Hamilton and we chose to stay in Hamilton. A lot of our people live here.”

“We are member of the chamber and participate with local churches and different charities in the

area.”

“Ten years ago, 15 years ago, we actually bought some falling down houses. We tore them down and made parking lots out of them, cleaned things up.”

“We love Hamilton.”

Q: What is something the company wishes it could do better?

A: “I’m just coming out of a meeting where we talked about hiring. When you talk about major growth, you’ve got to hire the right people and we’ve done a good job in the past, but we could do better.”

“A key to our growth is going to be hiring the right people who fit well with our culture, but also bring in some excellent talent. We’re constantly on the lookout for great people. We think it’s a great place to work.”

Q: What’s the biggest lesson the company learned from the recent recession and how is it being applied?

A: “2008 was our best year, then Lehman Brothers falls apart and the economic crisis (ensues) and the next quarter was a disaster for us. We ended up having to reduce our workforce by 20 percent. We had to dive into our whole budget process and economically really look at our business model.

“We found out that when times are pretty good, you’re pretty fat. We learned how to operate leaner and so we were able to restore the company. Even with the decreased sales we, like some other businesses, have regained our profitability and we invested in a bigger way into innovation.

“We kind of hunkered down and said ‘let’s innovate our way out of this situation’ and so for the next few years we came out with a number of new additions to our existing Kaivac machine and came up with our new OmniFlex machine, which we think is going to launch us into 26 percent growth (each year) for the next 10 years.”

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