

Word-of-Mouth Is the Best Advertising for Blair Water Conditioning

By Nate F Searing, *WC&P Managing Editor*



Employees (from left to right) back row: Gregg Gerhart, Mark Gerhart, Don Mesick. Front row: Dawn Engelmeir, Bob Nash, Andy Robbins

Founded in 1947 in Clearwater, Florida, Blair Water Conditioning has developed a reputation for quality that is echoed in hundreds of referrals each year. Those word-of-mouth recommendations have kept the business growing throughout the past two decades at lightning speed.

Now 57 years old, the company is eyeing the rest of Florida's potential for its portable exchange tanks and services with an aggressive franchising plan. If the company's penchant for referrals are any indication of Blair Water Conditioning's future success, their first franchised office (opening in Pasco County next year) will not be their last.

The foundation for success

Blair Water Conditioning is set apart from its competitors by more than just its plans for growth: the most unique asset of the company is the man behind it, president Mark Gerhart. He began working for Blair in 1984 as a route driver making about \$2.80 an hour.

Long established in Florida, Blair had never outgrown an 800-square-foot facility in Clearwater and catered to no more than 120 accounts. In 1989, Gerhart took advantage of an opportunity to buy the company. However, with such a small operation and a growing customer base he found himself working alone and managing all the operations of the company. He worked tirelessly completing deliveries, installations, plant operations and administrative duties. "I was working seven days a week, 14 hours a day," Gerhart said. "My heart and soul were in the company, but I knew if I didn't add some more people and start to expand that it would literally kill me." To that end, when the company reached

600 accounts, Gerhart hired his first employee.

Today, Blair Water Conditioning employs six people servicing three counties and thousands of satisfied customers.

Expansion in Pinellas

More than 90 percent of Blair Water Conditioning's business comes from residential consumers, with the remaining 10 percent in small commercial businesses. "Blair has really made a name for itself in being a local leader in residential water conditioning" Gerhart said. Exclusively servicing portable exchange tanks to provide these customers with conditioned water, the company features 10-inch stainless steel (no galvanization) tanks with a 60,000 grain capacity. For larger residential and commercial properties, Blair takes the unique approach of offering the 10-inch tanks in tandem or in series rather than larger tanks that are bulkier and more difficult to handle, Gerhart said.

"We do more than just provide the tanks; customers are paying for a quality service," Gerhart said. That requires three trucks continuously on the road, providing scheduled service to about 150 customers each day.

Those trucks also serve as Blair Water Conditioning's only form of traditional advertising. However, their marketing strategy expands far beyond the rolling billboards those vehicles represent.

Advertising without ads

Gerhart and Blair Water Conditioning have taken a unique approach to marketing their services. Other than a telephone listing in the phonebook, the

company does not advertise through any traditional avenues and there are no salespeople on staff.

Instead, the company relies upon an aggressive qualified referral program where customers can receive several months of free service for directing new customers to the firm.

The result, Gerhart noted, is a word-of-mouth reputation that is second to none.

"With the program, our focus isn't on where and how to best spend our advertising dollars. We can focus on providing quality services and let our products speak for themselves."

In fact, when Blair Water Conditioning adds a new customer in a previously untapped neighborhood, the company picks up an average of six homes in the area within three months due to referrals from the initial customer.

Blair Water Conditioning

970 Harbor Lake Drive
Safety Harbor, FL 34695
Tel: (877) 763-8987
Website: www.blairwater.com

Founded: 1947

President: Mark Gerhart

Staff: 6

Growth: Provides service to an average of 40 new clients each month

Mission Statement: Blair Water Conditioning strives to provide hassle-free soft water to our valued customers while helping to conserve our precious water supply.



Blair's limited advertising appears atop their truck fleet



Inside the Blair Water Conditioning plant in Safety Harbor, Florida

"There's no telemarketing, no knocking on doors. We let our customers sell our product because word-of-mouth referrals are stronger than any sales pitch I could make, and the service is so good that we're confident people will talk to their neighbors about it."



Company owner and president Mark Gerhart

"It's pretty amazing to watch," Gerhart said. "You deliver a tank to a new street and within a few months your truck is a common sight all over the neighborhood."

Gerhart credits the qualified referral program, outstanding honest service and a great product for the rapid growth of Blair Water Conditioning. Since the late 1990's, the company has maintained an average growth of about 40 new customers each month.

A model for success

For Gerhart, Blair Water Conditioning's current operation and organization structure is a model for success in the portable tank exchange industry. The company plans on expanding its regional success into a statewide operation.

Currently, Gerhart has licensed the Blair Water Conditioning name to his brother, Gregg Gerhart, and business partner Don Mesick, for a Pasco County-based office and has his sights set on the remainder of Florida. "I think we are in a really good position to move out to the rest of the state," Mark Gerhart said. "It's a great opportunity for us to grow

our business to the ever-expanding population of the Sunshine State."

Gerhart added that he plans to use their current operation, which moved into a 4,000-square-foot state-of-the-art facility in Safety Harbor, Florida, as a "mirror operation" for new franchises, taking their unique marketing strategies and reinforcing their commitment to customer service to trigger the phenomenal growth they've experienced thus far.

Conclusion

Whether it's courting new customers or new franchisees, Blair Water Conditioning has taken the simple but effective approach of letting the quality of their products and services speak for themselves. The result is a company that is growing faster than most, and doing so with no advertising and the right combination of customer service and attention to detail.

If you are in Florida, be on the lookout for Blair Water Conditioning because chances are they are coming to your neighborhood soon. Odds are you'll hear about them from a neighbor who swears by their service, and that's just the way they like it. ♦