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New location solidifies future

Family vacuum business sweeps through larger competitors

STRONGSVILLE, Ohio - As is the case with most products today, giant retailers are sucking up an increasing share of the vacuum cleaner market. Many independent dealers have bitten the dust in recent years, but Strongsville Vacuum continues to hold its own against the "big box" stores and discount retailers.

"Independent dealers make up 7 percent of the vacuum sales in the United States," said owner Bert Hockenberry, who has been dismantling and rebuilding vacuum cleaners since he was seven years old. "The big box stores are getting 93 percent of the business."

By offering attentive service and an excellent selection of products, Strongsville Vacuum is an exception, rather than the rule, in the market. Far from being swept under by giant retailers, Hockenberry has just expended into a new location in the heart of Strongsville. A 10-year lease indicates his intention to continue to service and sell vacuums and floor care products for the long-term.

The grand opening of the new location was attended by Strongsville Mayor Tom Perciak and many other residents who came out to support the local shop.

"I have never seen a community that is so loyal to local businesses," Hockenberry said. "People in this community want convenience and service. That's what we provide. We have what you want, when you want it, at a price you want to pay."

Large retailers might offer one or two brands of the products they sell. But Hockenberry carries all of the leading names in the vacuum market: Eureka, Hoover, Royal, Dirt Devil, Miele, Panasonic, Riccar, Lyndhaus and Dyson.

For an independent business, Hockenberry said, the key to success is service. That's a commodity not often seen in the big-box stores, where the staff often knows less about a product than the customer does.

"I carry a larger variety products than they do, plus I can sell them at the same price," he said. "But the difference with us is that you get service from the moment you walk in the door. What we offer is our expertise. We spend time with our customers to answer their questions and demonstrate our products. You can go into a big retailer and they know a little bit about everything. We know a lot about one thing. When people are making a purchase they want answers."

Hockenberry, whose wife, Nancy, partners in the business, has run the store for 23 years. He had been driving a semi-truck for 15 years when he saw the shop up for sale in 1982. The decision to buy was obvious. Hockenberry had tinkered with vacuum cleaners since he was a kid at his father's store in Parma. Today, vacuum repair accounts for 60 to 70 percent of Strongsville Vacuum's business. Sales make up the balance.

"I always loved to take things apart and put them back together," Hockenberry said. "Some of today's stuff is challenging."

When Hockenberry purchased the shop there were other independents competing for business. Today there are very few in the area.

"You don't see a lot of new start-ups in this business," he said. "I'm second generation. It's not something that people want to get into. It's not glamorous and it's a lot of hours."

Along with Nancy, Hockenberry has been able to maintain loyal employees. His two full-time employees have been with the store for 16 and five years. Another part-timer has been there for more than four years.

The new location, Hockenberry said, is a God-send.

"We have more space and a lot more visibility here," he said. "Visibility is important when you're up against people like Wal-Mart. They are always going to draw a lot of people because of who they are. But I think a lot of people are fed up with what they are getting at the big stores. Carpeting is more expensive than a vacuum cleaner and people want to make sure they are getting a quality product to maintain the carpet."

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