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Cantel Sweeping Strives to be "The Most Professional Parking Lot Sweeping Company in the Industry"



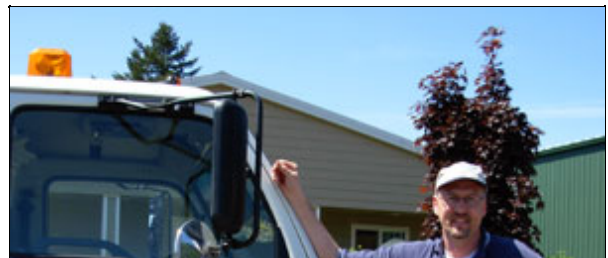
"The Most Professional Parking Lot Sweeping Company in the Industry"

After 15 years of working up the corporate ladders at US Bancorp and PacifiCorp Financial Services, the latter company scrapped the division Wagoner was in. Along with 300 other people, he found himself out of work. Instead of just trying to land another job in his field of accounting and finance, Wagoner sought to find a business to run, one where he could "escape" from his suit-and-tie life of working for others.

That turned out to be the 1993 purchase of Cantel Sweeping, a six-sweeper operation. Since then, Wagoner says, he has only looked forward, never backward. In the interim, under his leadership Cantel Sweeping has become the largest parking area sweeping company in the Portland, Oregon/Vancouver, Washington area. It has done so, says Wagoner, by trying to fulfill its mission of being the best parking area sweeping company in America.

by Ranger Kidwell-Ross

"When I lost my executive job in finance, I had the luxury of plenty of time to look around for what I wanted to do next," recalled Wagoner. "The problem was, I was out of work for almost a year looking for my next career move. Although that period was difficult, it was also ultimately one of the most rewarding for me since I was able to seriously consider not working for somebody else."



"In addition to looking for a job, I started looking for companies I could own where I could work for myself. That way of thinking opened the door to our purchase of Cantel Sweeping in 1993. At the time they specialized primarily in making barricades and traffic cones, but had a small sweeping division they wanted to divest."

With the support of his wife, Diona, (whose first reaction to such a radical move was "Are you crazy?!") the Wagoners sought a loan from his parents to supplement what they could contribute from their own savings. Combined with the current owner taking payments for five years, they were able to proceed. Looking back, he says, it was the best business decision they could have ever made.



When they bought the company it had seven employees and six sweepers, so it was sizeable enough to be noticeable and to provide some immediate support. At the same time, it presented some considerable challenges. "One thing I realized a few days after purchasing Cantel was that I didn't know what I was supposed to wear to work. I'd always worn a suit-and-tie, which were clearly not appropriate for this job. And, of course, that was just the beginning of my ongoing learning process."

From the very beginning, Wagoner determined to have the company's Mission be an emphasis on quality. He also wanted the company to have a high positive profile in the local community. "I'm a lifelong resident of Gresham, which is a suburb of Portland," said Wagoner. "I believe one of the opportunities that owning a business provides is the ability to give back to my community. I'm an unapologetic supporter of environmental causes and a born again Christian with a belief that God gave us this earth with a mandate to take care of it. That includes being a positive force in one's local community. Much of what we do on a community level stems from that belief system."

"In the sweeping industry we are involved in the environment; in cleaning up the environment. That is really the central mandate about power sweeping. We are helping remove pollutants that make it into the storm water system. And, once we sweep up this debris, another part of our mandate is to figure out what to do with it to dispose of it in the most correct fashion."

Unlike the majority of sweeping contractors, Cantel brings its debris back to its facility where it is sorted through a screening process. This segments the debris stream so that portions that may be reused are provided for other applications. Debris screening is a win-win all around: it is environmentally correct from an ethical standpoint, customers appreciate the company's environmental stance and the segmentation keeps disposal costs down, which allows Cantel to minimize expense for its customers.

"What we have developed is a state-of-the-art separating system," said Wagoner. "Our sweeper trucks bring the debris back to our main location, where it is dumped onto a concrete pad. It is covered so that no more rainwater gets into it. Runoff goes to an oil-water separator, which then sends the water to the sewer system and not the storm water system. Sweepings are sent into a tumbler, which separates out the dirt and rocks from the trash. We then further remove and recycle cardboard, plastic bottles and metal. The dirt and rocks we send to a local landfill, which is really a rock quarry. Finally, the relatively small



amount of real trash we dispose of at our local transfer station. I'm actually pretty proud of the separation operation we've put together here."



"Eighteen years ago I chose the tagline of wanting to be the most professional parking lot sweeping company in the industry. Sweeping is not just something that happens at night by some guy from his garage who then dumps the debris somewhere. Rather, it's a professional operation that removes debris in an environmental manner before it can pollute the world we live in and then disposes of all of it in the most sensible, ethical way possible."

As part of Cantel's mandate of professionalism, the company is a Certified Sweeping Contractor through the North American Power Sweeping Association (NAPSA). When asked about that process, Wagoner said he found it not that difficult to qualify since he was already doing pretty much everything that the NAPSA organization requires for its certification. "I have been a member of NAPSA since about the time it started," said Wagoner, "and am a supporter because of its stance in trying to improve the professionalism of the power sweeping industry."

Through the years, Wagoner has acquired six other companies, mostly small mom and pop-type parking lot sweeping firms who were looking for an exit strategy. Cantel Sweeping does not do any street sweeping, although it has three smaller units that allow for indoor sweeping. In addition, on the other end of the scale the company owns several TYMCO 600s in its fleet. These are used primarily for leaf pickup in the fall, which allows Cantel to tandem sweep, with the TYMCOs doing the major leaf pickup and their smaller Victory and Schwarze parking lot sweepers getting the rest of the material.

Today, the Cantel sweeper fleet is sized at 18, with a total of 28 employees that operate them and perform other tasks in the firm. "Although we have started doing more striping and pressure washing, those other services are only about 10% of our total business volume," said Wagoner. "Our core business is sweeping, and we don't foresee any significant changes in that."

Cantel Sweeping has an informative website that covers all the bases about the company's background, services, equipment and more. Although they also have a Facebook page, Wagoner admits that it has proven difficult to find things to say in order to generate interest. As part of the audio interview, I offered a variety of ideas about information and topics that sweeping contractors can discuss on their Facebook pages. Sweeping contractors who listen to the audio will learn a number of ideas on that topic.

In the audio you will also hear Wagoner's belief about what is at the core of running a successful business. "When you are trying to decide what you should be doing in your business," said Wagoner, "it's very important that you listen to your customers and find out what it is they want from you. Since I started out working in an office with a suit and tie on, I think I have a better understanding of that reality. One thing I know for sure is that it is extremely important to look at each situation from the perspective of your customers' managers."

"If they've got a problem, whether it's a broken trash container or litter in a corner of their parking lot, that's the problem. They don't really care how you solve it; they just want it solved, as long as it is done ethically and correctly. If you do the job and you give them the service, then chances are that they're going to be very happy."

For more about how Cantel Sweeping operates from its location in the Portland, Oregon area, including information not covered here, you are invited to listen to the approximately 50-minute audio interview with Michael Wagoner.

Note: The audio interview with Michael Wagoner will play without downloading any files onto your

computer. If you hear the interview at 'chipmunk speed,' you will need to download the latest version of [Adobe's free Flash player](#).

Note: To play the interview, click [this link](#) or on the small triangle inside the circle you see to the left. If you have any trouble accessing this audio, please [let us know](#).

Michael Wagoner may be reached via email sent to michael@cantelsweeping.com. You may also reach them by calling (503) 661-4337. The company's website is located at www.cantelsweeping.com.

If you have questions or comments about this article and interview, please, [let us know](#) and we can add it in as an addendum to this article.



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