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Cleaning up

Restoration Cleaners found a niche by restoring items damaged by fire and flood

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Craig H. Hartley/HBJ

Brian Adams of Restoration Cleaners: 'I enjoy providing service to people to help them.'

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Brian Adams' first venture into entrepreneurship — washing and folding hundreds of pounds of college students' dirty laundry — might not be considered very glamorous, but it proved to be the foundation for running a multimillion-dollar dry cleaning business.

Adams had the itch to start his own business early on. As a 20-year-old finance major at the **University of Alabama**, the Tyler native founded his own pick-up and delivery laundry service that catered to Tuscaloosa's college-student clientele.

He named the business "Bama Butler" and charged customers \$50 to launder 20 pounds of dirty clothes.

In the early days, Adams was Bama Butler's lone employee, he says.

He recalls the trips to the laundromat and the hours of folding, but he was soon reaping the rewards of a successful business plan.

Recognizing college students' penchant for convenience, Adams targeted dorm move-in as a prime opportunity to market to students.

As soon as the students walked in the door, information was available about Bama Butler's services and its packages. Not many college students could resist the prospect of avoiding laundry for a full semester.

Bama Butler grew over time, eventually enjoying a 30 percent profit margin, Adams says. He purchased a van, hired additional employees and, after two years, sold the company to a local Tuscaloosa businessman.

A Bama Butler placard still hangs in Adams' office, now housed in a 20,000-square-foot warehouse in West Houston near Beltway 8 and Interstate 10. Clearly, the former college entrepreneur has expanded his horizons far beyond the dormitory laundry service.

Today, Adams is a co-owner of Restoration Cleaners LLC, a Houston-based dry cleaning business that specializes in textile restoration. It's a company to call if fire, water or mold ravaged your clothes, rugs, drapes, fabrics or stuffed toys.

"We help restore (people's) lives to the way they were before," Adams says.

The textiles Restoration Cleaners has restored include a roomful of wigs, wedding dresses and a custom turquoise rug owned by National Basketball Association Hall-of-Famer and former Houston Rocket Moses Malone, Adams says. The heart-tugging customers are children whose teddy bears have been nearly destroyed by fire.

"They come home, and they're charred," Adams says. "And we're able to bring them back to how they were before. That's very gratifying."

Restoration Cleaners came into being in 2002 when two Texas businessmen Adams knew approached him to use his college laundry business as a springboard, Adams says.

At that time, mold remediation was all the rage, and the three men saw an opportunity to create a niche in the garment cleaning business.

Restoration Cleaners would target its services to insurance agents, insurance adjusters and homeowners seeking mold remediation for textiles.

The two other business partners — Harry Leatherwood and Devin Scott — fronted about \$250,000 in capital to get Restoration Cleaners up and running, Adams says. His own expertise in the garment-cleaning industry made him the ideal person to manage the operations.

And so, Restoration Cleaners got started with the purchase of more than \$100,000 worth of dry-cleaning equipment purchased from the first vendor that popped up on an Internet search. It arrived from Florida on a flatbed trailer, just about the time that mold claims dried up once insurance companies discontinued coverage.

“We had no business,” Adams says.

The partners had to re-evaluate their business model. Rather than abandon the company before it even got off the ground, they decided to target customers whose clothes and rugs were ruined by fires and floods.

In the beginning, business was painfully slow. Adams was the lone employee for six months, and the company did not have any positive cash flow for “a few” years, he says.

Nevertheless, he worked hard to establish a name for the fledgling company. He and other employees introduced themselves to full-service restoration companies and insurance claims adjusters, who refer business to Restoration Cleaners.

Adams recalls flipping through the Yellow Pages and cold-calling potential customers to drum up business.

“I believe in one thing in your life,” Adams says. “That the only way to make the phone ring is to keep calling.”

Business slowly trickled in. At first there might be two jobs a month, Adams says, then four. That increased to 12, and then 20, and then 50.

Today, Restoration Cleaners handles an average of 30 to 90 fire jobs a month, Adams says. The company has two offices — one in Houston and one in San Marcos — and 55 employees. Its coverage area spreads from Austin and San Antonio to the greater Houston area.

EMERGENCY LINE

The company’s revenue has likewise been on an upward swing, from \$3.4 million in 2006 to \$5.2 million in 2007, according to the company.

A key to the company’s success is providing superior professional service, Adams says. Restoration Cleaners has a 24-hour emergency line for customers to call for immediate service. The company offers to return emergency items within 24 to 72 hours, while other household textiles — clothes, rugs, etc. — can be packed and stored at the warehouse.

At the scene of a fire-ravaged house, Restoration Cleaners’ employees bag and seal the piles of smoke-ridden clothes, but not without a detailed inventory, Adams says.

One of Restoration Cleaners’ goals is to salvage the textiles at a cost savings, for both the owner and the insurance company, he says, adding that the dry cleaning service typically creates an 85 percent savings for the insurance companies.

Paul Davis Restoration of Greater Houston has become one of Restoration Cleaners’ most loyal sources of work.

The full-service restoration company has been contracting textiles to Restoration Cleaners for about four or five years, says Chad Golson, chief operating officer for the Houston franchise.

In fact, Restoration Cleaners has become its single-largest subcontractor, Golson says.

“Brian is just an unbelievably sharp guy,” Golson says. “He services our customers well.”

Restoration Cleaners offers quality professional service, Golson says, from its clean-shaven, uniformed employees down to the price and payment terms.

Another key to Restoration Cleaners’ growth in the Houston area lies in its marketing strategy. The company offers on-site and off-site continuing education classes to anyone holding a state insurance license, typically agents or adjusters. Because the Texas Department of Insurance requires license-holders to fulfill a minimum number of continuing education coursework, Restoration Cleaners’ classes help facilitate relationships with contacts in the insurance industry, says Lindsay Radenz, the company’s sales manager.

“It’s an extremely important part of our marketing program,” she says.

In addition, the classes give insurance agents and adjusters a better understanding of how Restoration Cleaners’ services fit into the larger restoration process.

Garment restoration is how Restoration Cleaners got its start and still accounts for roughly 50 percent of its business, but the company has not stopped there.

ADDITIONAL SERVICES

The business has added two other service lines to expand its customer base and to create a more diversified work flow. While fire-damaged homes provide a lot of their work, it can be inconsistent at times, Adams says.

Today, Restoration Cleaners’ dry-cleaning service for hotels accounts for about 30 percent of its business and restoring damaged electronics is about 20 percent, he says.

About 50 Houston-area hotels, including Hotel Derek and **The Houstonian** Hotel, Club & Spa, use Restoration Cleaners for their employees’ uniforms and for their guests’ needs. In fact, via the hotel connection, Restoration Cleaners can count Rudy Giuliani as a client. The former presidential hopeful, while on the campaign trail in Houston, needed his suit dry-cleaned in the middle of the night, Adams says.

For hotel clients, Restoration Cleaners offers custom packaging for clothing.

That was a selling point for The Houstonian, says Matthew Davis, the luxury hotel’s director of rooms. The hotel wanted to add a personalized touch to its guests’ dry cleaning with Houstonian-branded linen garment bags and collar stays.

The hotel, however, could not convince its previous dry-cleaning vendor to accommodate its request, Davis says.

Adams, a member at the Houstonian, offered to tailor the dry cleaner’s operations around the hotel’s needs. The Galleria-area luxury hotel took a chance, changed vendors, and has been using Restoration Cleaners for four years, Davis says.

“We liked the fact that they were willing to tailor their operation to accommodate The Houstonian’s high standards for garment processing and customized packaging,” he says. “No other provider was interested in offering that same level of flexibility.”

As for Adams, he plans to watch Restoration Cleaners soar to new heights.

“I enjoy providing service to people to help them,” he says. “It’s rewarding in that sense. It’s rewarding to see something grow.”