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Rookie *success*

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Rookie

At 36, Lee Grant, president of Coastal Chemical & Paper, proves that young blood can thrive in jan/san distribution

Stephanie S. Beecher, Associate Editor

For eight months in 2000, Lee Grant lived the life of a young Hollywood luminary: Cast as a baseball player in the romantic comedy, “Summer Catch,” starring then-famous heartthrob Freddie Prinze Jr., sidekick Matthew Lillard, and teen beauty Jessica Biel, Grant spent long summer days on set doing what any major league hopeful does best — playing ball — not to mention rubbing elbows with the stars.

Though he’s not a professional ball player or a celebrity, Grant is now a star in his own right. At just 36 years old, Grant is the owner of jan/san supply company, Coastal Chemical & Paper Inc. Based in the beautiful beachside city of Wilmington, N.C. Grant built his company from the ground up, and is now riding the waves of its success.

In the jan/san industry, Grant is nothing short of an anomaly. Years younger than his peers, he has had to work double-time to earn the respect of clients and competi-

tors, alike — especially as a first-generation business owner in an industry that has, historically, struggled to attract and retain young talent.

“Trust is a big thing,” Grant says. “It’s all about solving problems. If you can do that at a fair price, and make someone’s life easier, you have a good chance.”

While Grant holds fast to the wisdom of the janitorial trade, his success is due in part to his “new school” approach. The company’s rapid adoption of technology, its hiring of “fresh,” young talent, and its team mentality stand among its principal distinctions.

That last element shouldn’t come as a surprise: Grant didn’t just play an athlete in a summer flick; he was a Division I baseball player — a pitcher for the University of North Carolina–Wilmington Seahawks, to be exact.

“Lee was always determined — he always wanted what was best for the team,” says Grant’s college baseball coach, Mark

Success

Scalf. "He's an extremely hard worker and tremendously competitive. He's always willing to put in for the win."

From Field Dreams To Jan/San Supply

When Grant's field dreams failed to come into fruition, he shifted gears to launching his own company. Scalf believes Grant's competitive spirit on the field and off, helped to fuel his penchant for goal setting and sales, ultimately driving Coastal Chemical & Paper to become one of the largest distributors in the Carolinas.

Although his mother and father owned a small chemical manufacturing company — selling mainly chemicals to area car washes — Grant wasn't sure if the business was for him. He wanted something for himself. Or as he puts it: "I just didn't know any better," he jokes.

Instead, Grant began to formulate a plan to tackle the supply needs of car dealerships, detailers and auto rental establishments. He met with a jan/san re-distributor ("with no money and no credit," he adds) and worked out a deal to sell some of its products. Then he turned to his parents for a little business advice.

"My folks said: 'Look, you got to beat the streets and make the sales calls. Tell people you are new,'" says Grant. "Everybody has to start somewhere."

Heeding his parent's advice, Grant made sales calls during the day, while his college sweetheart and fiancé, Sommer,



worked full-time at a separate company. At night, she handled all of Coastal's bookkeeping.

"I knew he could be good at sales because he attracts people — he can hold the room," Sommer says. "I was excited for him."

Grant started small, stockpiling foodservice disposables, paper products and degreasers in the couple's garage, and delivering the products from the back of his 1995 Nissan Maxima, something that seems comical to the couple now.

It turns out, all that driving around led Grant to a game-changing epiphany.

"Really, while I was in all those places I was seeing opportunity," Grant recalls. "I thought, 'If we are going to be coming here we should start selling supplies for the entire facility.' Once I got going, I was able to move into a mini-storage facility."

Coastal Chemical Grows

Within three years, Coastal Chemical was experiencing a remarkable upward trajectory. The company was able to purchase its first "legitimate" location, a 1,500 square foot office and warehouse, and began to add product lines to its inventory.

Sommer left her full-time job and came to work side-by-side with her now husband to help shoulder the weight. To top it off, the couple had just welcomed their first child.

Today, the couple are parents to three daughters, all under the age of 10.

"I got busy, really fast," Grant says. "I couldn't expand anymore because I was doing sales and deliveries. You bottleneck. Eventually, I hired a full-time operator to handle the inside sales, and a full-time driver to handle the deliveries."

Taking advantage of Wilmington's booming tourist industry, the company also expanded its services to include restaurant and hospitality clientele, as well as other businesses.

It wasn't always easy, however. Grant's age and inexperience could be a tough sell at times. It was an obstacle he says he overcame simply by providing consummate service.

"Let's be honest: We are selling items that a lot of people can go sell, but we are selling the process and knowledge and that's what separates us," Grant says. "It's our willingness to do whatever it takes to help the customer."

By attending jan/san conferences, poring over manufacturers' manuals, reading trade publications and bending the ears of his parents, Grant absorbed as much

as he could in the way of industry and product knowledge, and threw in a dash of charisma here and there for good measure.

"Sales is where I hang my hat," Grant explains. "I enjoy talking to people, learning about their families. When I was in my 20s it was more of a challenge to gain the trust of larger accounts, but we were able to gain their trust incrementally over the years."

It also helps that he is "ultra-competitive," he says.

Growing up one of four children, Grant admits he has always hated to lose — whether it was in a game of checkers with his siblings, a game of ball, or while pursuing an account.

His competitive nature absolutely drives his work ethic, he says.

"I always tell customers, 'I want you to be my customer for the next 30 years, not the next 30 days,'" says Grant. "I believe we out-service our competitors. You may choose someone for another reason, but it won't be because we are outworked."

Employees Are Like Family

That sentiment is exactly why Grant is so keen on hiring a first rate team. By most measures, Coastal Chemical is a small company with about a dozen employees. But it's also unique. Not only are many of the employees fellow UNC-Wilmington alumni, but many of them are also former athletes.

It's not exactly by design, Grant says, but the correlations have definitely created a constructive and upbeat work culture.

"I just always go back to the teamwork aspect. If you are an athlete at a decently high level, naturally there is that work ethic and teamwork," Grant says. "From top-to-bottom we have very quality people that we have bought into our culture here."

That includes everyone from his wife (who wears many hats within the company) to Coastal Chemical's delivery drivers, he says.

"I tell our operations and delivery guys all the time: It takes months sometimes to get a customer, but it can take seconds to lose one. They are the last person representing the company during a sell, so their professionalism and willingness to do what it takes really matters," says Grant.

According to Sommer, the staff's geniality has boosted the company's morale inside, as well as contributed to the company's reputation within the tight-knit beach community.

"[Grant] has a knack for hiring people," she says. "The people he has chosen for our company, they are just good people. They are like family. When you have customers



Lee Grant (left), and wife Sommer are all smiles in Coastal Chemical's recently expanded warehouse



The Grants meet with Coastal Chemical staff. Most of the company's employees are in their early 30s and fellow UNC-Wilmington alums

call you and say, 'You guys have good people that are coming in here,' that really means a lot."

It also helps that the staff members are close in age — most of Coastal's employees are in their early 30s. The energy is good for the company, adds Grant, and even better for the jan/san industry.

"At ISSA, they are always talking about getting young blood into the industry," Grant says. "We embrace a lot of things that the old school janitorial houses may not want to embrace. We embrace technology. We're an opportunity for growth. Young people want to work with a mission."

Building The Business

So far that mission has been an exciting, yet calculated rise to the top. When the business began to outgrow its small warehouse location in the mid-2000s, Grant and Sommer were able to sell the location and use the proceeds to move into a bigger space, as well as build a safety net for the company.

Once Coastal Chemical became more established on the coast, Grant began reaching out to customers outside of Wilmington, including as far west as Greensboro, and down into Charleston, South Carolina. Those efforts fueled rapid business expansion, even as the rest of the country was embroiled in the economic downturn.

By 2010, Coastal Chemical began to lease its second location to another company, and purchased an 11,500-square-foot warehouse. Since then the company has added a 5,000-square-foot building expansion bringing their current facility to 19,500 square feet. Today, the company has 12 employees, six fleet delivery trucks, and serves customers in the healthcare, restaurant, hotel and education sectors.

It's an impressive feat, considering the company has been in existence for little more than a decade.

"Coastal Chemical has grown significantly every year," Sommer says. "It's almost overwhelming, but we're very grateful. It's been awesome to watch the growth pattern."

While Grant has made it a point to grow Coastal Chemical organically he has also taken advantage of additional revenue-growing opportunities. The company recently completed its third acquisition — a local company that sells coffee, vending and office supplies.

"We want to be able to capture the break room business," Grant explains. "Everything in a facility — as it makes sense for us — we want to be able to sell. We want to have everything under one roof."

The company has also invested in a host of technology — from its smartphones and tablets for staff, to its user-friendly website,

comprehensive online product catalog, and customer management software program.

"The (software) technology has helped us tremendously," Grant says. "It has markers that will pop up and say, 'This is due.' It picks up your order patterns. If a person isn't ordering, then a salesperson can go and find out why, instead of running it down six months later."

It doesn't hurt that Sommer's degree is in Information Technology, either, Grant jokes.

"She's been unbelievable on the technology aspect," he says.

Despite the company's dedication to growth, Grant says he prefers to keep Coastal

Chemical's footprint a local one. He has no desire to extend the company beyond a "two to three" hour radius," at least for now.

"We want to make sure we can handle it, instead of just going across the state and extending ourselves," he says. "We still want to talk to customers. You lose that relationship when you build a bit."

Making Coastal A Homerun

Grant admits it can be difficult for a company to set itself apart from its competitors, especially in an industry like jan/san. It is even more difficult when the company's owner has fewer years of experience than his peers. Previously, when Grant attended business meetings, he was always the youngest guy on the block. Today, he sees age as an advantage.

"A lot of contacts my age are coming into management roles or are becoming key decision makers in the community," including in the jan/san world, he says. "Over the last couple of years I'm seeing and meeting some young owners, either second-generation or investor owners."

For Grant, the key to his success has always been his relationships — within the cleaning industry and within his growing business community.

Grant serves on the board of the UNC-Wilmington Alumni Association and the Seahawk Club, which serves as the financial arm of the university's athletic program. Coastal Chemical is also the presenting sponsor at the UNC-Wilmington's annual golf tournament, and a participant in several area fundraisers for local charities.

That distinction, combined with the success of his business, has earned Grant a Young Alumni of the Year award, as well as coverage in a local business publications and magazines.

Grant's achievements have taken him from a scrappy entrepreneur to a bona fide businessman.

"I think personally, he has had to work really hard to gain respect," says Sommer. "The service that Lee provides...it's a difficult thing for him to juggle on his part, but it means a lot to the customers. We still have his very first customer account ordering from us today."

In spite of his success, Grant remains a humble man, she adds. At Coastal Chemical's home base, she says the walls are lined with motivational posters and quotes from which he continues to draw inspiration.

Grant's favorite?

"Yesterday's homerun does not win today's game," Sommer says. "He lives by that, he really does." **SM**