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From a couple of squeegees and a T-Bird to a \$900,000 business



By DICK YOUNGBLOOD, Star Tribune

Last update: September 30, 2008 - 10:44 PM

Jack Ruegsegger tried to fit into a conventional 9-to-5 career, honest he did.

When he failed to get into medical school, he signed on as a trainee at a Minneapolis stock brokerage, a low-paying position that prompted him to spend his weekends the way he had worked his way through college: as a window washer.

Two months into his training, his boss hired him to wash the windows on his imposing Wayzata residence – after which he quit the brokerage job to start his own window washing company. His explanation was impeccable: “I realized that I’d made more in one weekend washing his windows than I’d made in two weeks at his brokerage.”

Nine years later, Ruegsegger, 32, has built his company, Blaine-based Jack & Joe’s Window Cleaning Inc., into a business headed for nearly \$900,000 in 2008.

And it would be well above \$1 million in sales if he hadn’t sold nearly 30 percent of his revenue base in the south metro area to start a franchising business in 2006. Five more franchises have been sold since then, in St. Cloud, Brainerd and Alexandria, Minn., as well as Grand Rapids, Mich., and Atlanta.



Jack & Joe’s is the official corporate name, but both the window cleaning company and the new Jack & Joe’s Franchising Inc. are doing business as Squeegee Squad, a familiar name that Ruegsegger has plastered on signs scattered across the metro area.

Oh yes, and the Joe on the corporate nameplate is Jack’s younger brother. Joe, 29, who was the company’s first employee and now serves both as chief operating officer and the gent in charge of providing reality checks to temper his visionary brother’s blizzard of entrepreneurial brainstorm.

This right-brain, left-brain combination has worked well since they started in 1999 with a couple of squeegees and an 11-year-old T-Bird: 2007 revenue reached \$784,000, including \$65,000 from a Naples, Fla., branch they opened last year.

In the first eight months of 2008, sales rose 19 percent, to \$595,000, which puts the company on a track to gross nearly \$860,000 this year. That would put the business near its peak of \$888,000 in 2005, before it sold its south metro business.

The 2008 total so far includes \$89,000 from the Naples operation, which was put up for sale in September. In addition, the franchising company collected \$23,000 in royalties thus far, headed for about \$40,000 for the year.

Some cold-calling late last year paid off with an agreement with a local janitorial company to have Squeegee Squad wash windows on 50 of the office buildings it serves. That, in turn, inspired Jack to begin calling janitorial franchisors nationwide in pursuit of what he called “strategic partnerships.”

The result: He recently reached a tentative agreement with Office Pride, a Pensacola, Fla., franchise firm, whereby the Florida company would promote the sale of Squeegee Squad franchises to its 60 franchisees as an add-on service.

The Ruegseggers will be training an Office Pride franchisee in Pensacola for a trial run to judge how symbiotic the two businesses are.

Just what does a window-cleaning franchise company have to offer besides a bucket, a squeegee and a ladder?

Jack’s answer: “Experience and a system,” including custom software for managing scheduling, payroll and billing, and a stack of marketing materials ranging from yard signs and door hangers to direct mail, truck decals and uniforms.

Oh yes, and a 3-inch-thick operations manual that covers everything from hiring and training to office procedures to estimating job charges. Not to mention a nine-page section devoted to the art of cleaning a variety of windows.

That’s not counting a service focus that requires telephones to be answered without the aid of a recorded voice – what a concept – and that bids be returned within a day and work scheduled within a week.

The company also insists on immediate resolution of complaints: “If there’s a single little streak on the corner of a window, we’ll be back the next day to fix it,” Jack said.

One payoff of that attitude came in a September consumer report in the Wall Street Journal, which tested four national window cleaning franchises for quality of service, including a Squeegee Squad unit in Atlanta.

The conclusion: “The best bet for our buck was Squeegee Squad, which nicely shined our 2,200-square-foot, 1906 bungalow and all its varied glass – including original wavy panes, stained glass and newly insulated windows – for \$175, the Journal reported. “Then they knocked another 10 percent off because we were a first-time customer.”

The writer also expressed appreciation that the cleaner took off his shoes inside and stuck to his original quote after realizing there were more windows than anticipated.

In short, it was business as usual, according to the Ruegseggers.

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