

IN PROFILE

■ **Spotless Dry Cleaners: “It’s not clean unless it’s Spotless.”**

Imagine this: a hysterical bride drops juice down the front of her wedding gown hours before the wedding.

Is this a disaster? Not at all, if – and here’s the caveat – if the bride’s cleaner is Burlington-based Spotless Dry Cleaners.

Cathy Commisso, President and C.E.O., opened the dry cleaning plant, flicked on the giant boiler and set the equipment - which typically handles sixty pounds.- working away on the 5 -pound wedding gown. A few hours later, the happy bride calmly walked down the aisle, none of the guests any the wiser.

“We go the extra mile for our clients,” says Commisso, who remembers the time company personnel opened up an outlet for a client who needed his best suit for a funeral. “From day one, we decided our company would be based on exceptional client service and high-quality cleaning services.”

Clearly, her formula for success is working: for 8 years in a row Spotless Dry Cleaners has been voted “Best Dry Cleaners” by readers of the Burlington Post and Oakville Beaver.

A veteran of the dry cleaning business, Commisso spent her after-school hours and weekends helping out at her parents’ Burlington Dry Cleaners chain.

“As soon as I could drive, my Dad had me going from outlet to outlet pitching in with whatever was needed, helping out with the books and payroll,” says Commisso. “I really credit my Dad with the business knowledge that he helped me achieve.”

In 1994, Commisso – who really enjoys being an entrepreneur – opened Spotless Dry Cleaners with a 600- square foot outlet.

Today, the company boasts 30 outlets – two-thirds of them franchised - along with five cleaning plants. The company also offers a complete alteration and repair service. It is well-known among the communities it serves in Burlington, Oakville, Mississauga, Milton, Richmond Hill, Vaughn and downtown Toronto.

Not surprisingly, the company’s growth was initially fuelled by Commisso’s keen attention to detail and customer satisfaction.

Initially, she outsourced the actual cleaning, but was dissatisfied with the results. “Orders were late and the cleaning wasn’t up to my standards,” she recalls. “The only way to control the quality was to open a plant and supply the outlet ourselves.”

Spotless Dry Cleaners

- Corporate and Franchised Dry Cleaning Outlets, Dry Cleaning Plants
- Founded 1994 in Burlington, Ontario.
- 65 corporate employees, 30 franchised outlets
- Goal: to grow the franchise side of the business, with 50 outlets open by 2008



Feltmate Delibato Heagle

L A W Y E R S

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Running the plant was actually a blessing in disguise, since the company then had the capacity to clean garments for more than one outlet. Within the year, Spotless Dry Cleaners expanded to five carefully-scouted locations.

“Picking the right locations is absolutely key, customers want to be able to park, drop off or pick up their cleaning quickly, and get on the road again,” she says.

“I used to drive around and check out potential locations. One time, I saw a cleaners that looked like it wasn’t doing very well, they didn’t have a lot of customers. I kept watching and the day they closed down, I approached their landlord. That outlet, today, is thriving in our system.”

Extending the reach of the system by converting some corporate-owned stores into franchised outlets is a short-term goal for Commisso. She anticipates that within six months, most of the outlets will be franchised; two plants, with their on-site outlets, will remain in the corporate fold. This will leave her free to evaluate the potential of opening more new franchised outlets.

Still, increased market penetration and more franchised units doesn’t mean Commisso will be any less hands-on. She’s the first to jump in to help out in an outlet if there’s a problem. No grandstanding here.

She’s also a born marketer, whose business card features an “emergency” button that can be affixed, via a push-through pin, on a moment’s notice. It’s just a little touch, but reflective of Commisso’s thoroughness and understanding of the business sector.

She also understands the differing styles and dynamics of communication with both employees and franchisees. But whether she’s talking with an employee or a franchisee, there is one constant: Commisso runs her company with an “open-door policy.”

Employees - there are five in the office and 65 spread throughout the corporate outlets and plants- are free to contact her directly. She knows them all by name, just as she does the franchisees and their families. She doesn’t believe in multiple levels of administration and complicated decision-making. “Let’s sit down and discuss it” is her motto.

Now her challenge is to maintain momentum in what she acknowledges is clearly a competitive business environment.

“I want to expand the number of outlets to around 50 by 2008,” she says, with a smile. “I really want to see this company grow and prosper. I love a challenge. I’m in this business for the long run.”



*Debi Sutin of Feltmate Delibato
Heagle with Cathy Commisso*

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