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Roy Heilman (center), Kansas City president of the recently renamed Ace ImageWear, is flanked by his nephew Ed Heilman (left), vice president and general manager in Kansas City, and son Bill Heilman, the Kansas City service director. Roy Heilman's father founded the family-owned company in 1932.

Cleaning up

In a uniform industry, Ace ImageWear tags itself with its 'mom and pop' roots

BY TAMMY WORTH | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Ace ImageWear's clients don't spend much time thinking about the company that supplies and cleans their uniforms, logo mats, mops, towels and other products - and the owners of Ace wouldn't have it any other way.

"If I have to be in the business of watching what my linen people are doing, I've got the wrong company," said Henry Belfonte, owner of Belfonte Ice Cream & Dairy Foods Co. "We just don't have issues with them."

Like Belfonte, Ace ImageWear is a hometown company, started by Ed and Clara Heilman in their basement with \$1,800 in seed money. Although the company has come a long way from its origins, the owners recently decided to move forward by looking back to their roots.

In addition to its Kansas City location (previously called AAA Uniform Services), the company has an office in Beaumont, Texas, and service centers in Dallas and Houston. The Texas locations operated under the name Shepherd's Uniform and Linen Supply.

After reaching an impasse about whether to combine the two companies and what to call the unified organization, the Heilman family decided, in their 75th year of operation, to enlist outside help. InQuest Marketing assisted in the efforts, re-branding the company and renaming both locations Ace ImageWear.

Ed Heilman, the founder's grandson and current vice president and general manager in Kansas City, said the process of creating a new identity was an awakening for the management.

For years, Heilman had taken offense to being referred to as a "mom and pop" shop. He said management tried to present the company as large when competing against bigger local and national competitors.

But after reading research that uniform service buyers don't feel as though they have a relationship with and tend to get lost in bigger com-

ACE IMAGEWEAR

Description: Creates customized image programs that include uniform and protective apparel for rental and purchase, logo mats, mops, microfiber products, towels, aprons and restroom products

Top Executives: In Kansas City, President Roy Heilman and Ed Heilman, vice president and general manager; in Texas, President David Heilman

Revenue: \$13 million

Employees: 160 total, 90 in Kansas City

Founded: 1932

Address: 4120 Truman Road, Kansas City, MO 64127

Telephone: 816-231-5737

Internet: www.aceimagerwear.com

panies, he had a realization.

"We were trying to avoid the 'mom and pop' strategy when we should have been embracing it," Heilman said. "This gave us a chance to take the fundamentals and values we have always had, but have a better package to send them out in. We had a story; we just didn't know it was that good."

The story begins in 1932, when Heilman's grandfather moonlighted as a boxer under the name Ace. Ace Linen Service & Laundry provided residential and commercial cleaning services to area clients.

From the basement of his house, then on to the garage and then to a building on Truman Road in Kansas City, the company grew through the years, changing its name in the 1950s to AAA to be placed first in the phone book.

Eventually, founder Heilman split the com-

pany into two parts: Ed took the commercial side, and his brother took the residential work. In the 1960s, AAA began providing and cleaning uniforms for industrial, hospitality and medical clients. And in the 1990s, the company began to focus its efforts on industrial services.

"Getting rid of the plant work on the hospitality linen and the sales effort on the hospitality linen allowed us to get better at processing uniforms, drive our costs down and become more proficient in competing on the street against the other guys," Ed Heilman said.

Since its move to industrial, the company has more than doubled from a volume of \$70,000 a week in 1990 to \$160,000 today. Approximately 155,000 pounds of laundry now move through the 50,000-square-foot facility each week. With the Beaumont plant, the figure rises to 300,000 pounds.

Ace ImageWear signs multiyear service agreements to supply garments, Heilman said. The company also customizes images for the garments.

The organization also has experienced significant technological changes.

In the five years before working with then AAA, Belfonte said his company went through three uni-

form supply companies. One of the big problems he said he encountered with other organizations was uniform loss.

Other companies were having problems tracking the employees' more than 1,300 uniforms, but Belfonte said Ace ImageWear's bar code system has almost eliminated the issue of loss.

Ace has about 250,000 garments in movement at any given time, Heilman said. About 10 years ago, the company implemented a bar coding system that scans each piece and collects information, including inventory accuracy, the uniform's owner, the number of washings and the number of weeks of revenue derived from the garment. Heilman said Ace is one of only two local uniform providers to use bar coding.

"When products get to the end of their useful life, there is a balance there between leaving them in too long to increase your revenue and servicing the customer properly and maintaining their image in the way that they want," Heilman said. "The bar code helps us in addressing those issues."

Steve Hall, vice president of fixed operations at Jay Wolfe Automotive Group, said Ace is much more precise than other companies with which he has worked.

"If you have a bad garment or uniform, a lot of other companies don't want to replace it and repair it as willingly," he said. "But they know our image is at stake. It is the business partnership that you don't have to worry about."

More recent technology upgrades include an automated sorting system that improves accuracy while reducing the manpower needed for the task. The company also is buying software that will allow customers to view and track account information online. And their drivers have upgraded to handheld devices in lieu of paper.

And although Heilman said that keeping up with technology is mandatory in the business, the company stands by the principle of doing business "on a first-name basis."

Heilman worked for a period of time at Unitog Co. and said he prefers working at a local, family-owned company.

Other than making his own rules and having less red tape, one thing he is certain of when working with family is that they all are working for the same purpose.

"Working with family can be good and bad, but generally speaking, we know we all have the same motivation, which is to service the customer better than the national guys can," he said. "As long as you keep the core values in mind, it's all right."



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Ace ImageWear employee Bertriz Lopez organizes clothes before attaching bar code labels that are used to track garments during their cleaning and use.