

SUPPLYHOUSE

TIMES

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ASA President

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First Supply's top management includes Joe Poehling (left); Elliott Collier (center), COO of the Eastern locations; and Mike Hickok, COO of Western locations.

Aggressive customer service is only possible with dedicated, knowledgeable employees who are appropriately compensated for hard work and share in company benefits. If you give employees the ability to progress and give them the tools they need to succeed at their jobs, your company will prosper.

Well-stocked inventory doesn't mean overstuffing warehouse shelves. It means selecting quality products that your customers need and want and making sure they are available when needed.

First Supply has become quite a large regional chain. Do you have ambitions to grow beyond the four-state region now serviced?

We define ourselves as a regional distributor and will grow only as opportunities are made available to us in this area and as we have the talent to support that growth. We do feel that as we grow, the better we can service customers with greater inventoried product, strengthen vendor relations

and encourage employee skills. Our various warehouses and CDC make a wider variety of products available to a much broader customer area. We have not only added more brand products but have increased the depth in product lines such as Kohler, Elkay and A. O. Smith.

Is further consolidation of the industry inevitable, and what do you see in the future for independent wholesalers — both regional chains like your company, as well as smaller, single-location distributors?

Yes, consolidation is inevitable, but there is room for strong regional chains as well as smaller distributors. In order to survive and thrive, we have to change to meet the challenges of everyday business. We have to be knowledgeable on the trends that are developing and be proactive in preparing for those changes.

We have to train for those changes and evaluate the results. Then we repeat the process and evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. For instance, online shopping and buying is becoming more and more prevalent in all product lines. First Supply's response to this trend is our proprietary e-supply program, where contractors can fully manage their business with First Supply online. For example, they can search for product information, price it, check availability, place orders and view order status. E-supply goes further by letting customers check order status, retrieve and download statements and invoices and pay their bill. Pending orders can be edited and/or deleted.

Whether you are a regional chain or a single-location distributor, you have to keep up with changes in the industry that are coming from many different areas, including Washington, D.C., the Federal Reserve or the research labs at the manufacturers. These all are creating challenges and opportunities that we can either choose to take advantage of or to ignore.

The whole concept of "Green" is a great example of change facing our industry and society. Conservation concerns have pushed codes and regulations that manufacturers have to meet and that we as suppliers have to sell to our customers.

What's the biggest challenge you face as a wholesaler?

Any company is only as strong as its employees. If your employees are happy and feel successful at their jobs of servicing the customer, then your company will prosper. Training and education of your employees is paramount. First Supply has always put emphasis on product education at weekly sales meetings and always welcomed the expertise of many sales reps. Education doesn't end with just product knowledge. Although that's the most challenging for us to do a good job at providing, we also work to provide skill sets for the jobs as well.

We also view our benefits programs as another important key to our low turnover as well as our college recruitment programs. Our employee wellness programs especially have been successful in this area.

What advice can you give fellow ASA distributors about coping in today's sour economy?

The economy is always in a pendulum movement swinging from stronger to flatter and different segments are in constant movement. I don't think of the economy as sour so much as evolving. If you think in terms of evolving, you think of the ways you are going to cope with those evolutions. Your company has to meet challenges with long-range planning and the ability to adapt quickly.