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## the **WASH-word**

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## Siblings take over family car wash businesses

### Brothers and sisters continue the legacy

by Karen Dalton

#### DOMENIC DIMONTE

When it comes to car washes Domenic DiMonte knows his stuff. After graduating from university, he joined his father in the family business in Toronto. "Dad started in the business 53 years ago at Crosstown Car Wash and Auto Service," commented DiMonte, "working first as an employee and then manager at our full-service St. Clair and Bathurst St. location. He purchased the car wash in 1978, and since then we've developed two locations and purchased two existing car washes."

Domenic's brother, Sergio, and sister, Marie, are also involved with the business. The DiMontes now own and operate a nine-

CCA Member Sergio DiMonte stands proudly in front of Crosstown Car Wash, one of five car wash locations in Toronto, Ontario, owned and operated by the DiMonte family.

bay coin-operated car wash, opened 18 months ago, and four tunnel car washes – one touchless, one exterior cloth and two full-service interior and exterior car washes.

"Our biggest challenge, other than managing staffing levels for volume, is the complexity of having multiple types of car washes. Customers today seem to want either a good, really cheap car wash or really good, high end full-service," said DiMonte. This polarization of customer needs may change the way the business operates. "We're considering two approaches: one involves tinkering with the way we do business now, and the other would involve major, dramatic changes.

"We're debating whether to offer fully staffed, express car wash services in the \$29-\$35 range, which would be a mini shampoo, or virtually eliminate the staff at our exterior washes and lower the price to \$5 and increase volume. Other plans include more sites if the right location comes along.

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"We're very pleased with the success of our new Crosstown Coin Car Wash," said DiMonte. "Staffing isn't an issue, and we can monitor the operation through video surveillance from anywhere to ensure that everything is running smoothly." Most of their locations have ViewGate digital video recording equipment installed.

"When we attended the CARWACS trade show in March, we were particularly interested in new technology now available for credit card payments at coin car washes. Market research has shown that customers tend to spend more when they use a credit card," noted DiMonte.

"With weather and competition, you can't last in this business without looking for ways to improve and change," remarked DiMonte wisely.

### CHAD MEHLER

Having more than one full-time job doesn't seem to faze Chad Mehler and his siblings. Not only does he own and operate Matt's Car Wash in Estevan, Saskatchewan with his brother, Jason, they also run a 3,400-acre farm, and he works for SaskPower. Their sister, Brenda, who is part owner and operator of the car wash, also runs a 250-cattle operation with her husband.

Chad, Jason and Brenda purchased the self-serve wand nine-bay car and two-bay truck wash business six years ago from their father, Matt, when he retired. "We've made several significant changes to the 25-year-old operation," said Mehler.

"We're in a very competitive market, and we needed to upgrade our facility. Most recently we installed new Sunshine Doors, manufactured in Red Deer, Alberta by Door Masters, which let in a lot of light," said Chad.

"We changed all the coin boxes with our own, locally designed and built computer timer system. While there were sys-

tems on the market we could have purchased, they didn't quite meet our needs," he added. "The personal and commercial charge accounts tie into a centralized computer that prints the receipt at the time of the wash, and then we track and bill at the end of each month."

Matt's Car Wash has maintained a very personal touch by not automating the door opening or requiring access codes. "The customers let us know they're there; we hand open the door and then activate the wash from the office," explains Chad.

"We also maintain the loonie, toonie and quarter timers, which our customers really like," said Mehler. "If our customers want to come in and just wash mud off their boots for a quarter, they can do that. Most car washes make you put in \$1 no matter how much time you need, but we've found our customers really appreciate the flexibility of a 25¢ timer."

In addition to the new computer system and doors, Chad has recently converted from natural gas to coal for both building heat and water. "We made a significant investment in new coal boilers after researching both electric and solar heating options. The new boilers are very clean and efficient, and the investment is well worth it. Because of our proximity to the coal fields in Saskatchewan, we've reduced our energy costs by 90%, which will allow us to maintain our prices for five years longer than if we'd stayed with natural gas," said Mehler.

The Mehlers are open for business 365 days a year starting at 7 a.m. in the summer months and have 'no real close' policy. "We stay open until the last customer is finished, sometimes past midnight."

### GRANT ELGIE

The old saying, "the customer is always right," certainly applies to the owner of Tangent Car Care in London, Ontario. "I wanted to get my car cleaned and ended up

buying the interior detailing business," said Grant Elgie. That was five years ago. Now he and his wife, Lisa, who is the bookkeeper, manage a 2,400 sq. ft. facility with two, full-time employees.

Since they purchased the detailing business, the Elgies have literally doubled the size and revenue of the operation. "We've increased every single aspect of the business, and we're currently considering doubling again to accommodate the transport truck market," said Grant. "We usually extend our hours every year in the summer months, and this year we'd like to handle the truck volume more efficiently with a larger building."

New and used truck cleanups are physically demanding and labour-intensive. It usually takes six hours per truck for a fully reconditioned cleaning.

"Our customer base is 70% wholesale and only 30% retail. While the majority of our clients are car and truck dealerships and government fleets," said Elgie, "we still face ups and downs in business largely in the winter months. Learning to understand and live with the weather is a challenge. The fluctuations in weather not only affect when customers get their cars and trucks cleaned, they also affect car and truck sales, which in turn impact our business."

Elgie's words of wisdom for detailers? Don't rely 100% on retail. "I've seen 11 local detailing shops open and then go out of business in the past five years, and it usually happens in the months of January, February and March. While the margins may be lower on the wholesale business, volume is likely to be more consistent. Dealerships and fleets should be your bread and butter," advises Elgie.

Detailing is a very rewarding business, he says. "When you see the final results and have a happy customer who can't believe their once disgusting vehicle looks so awesome, you feel good about what you do."

OCTANE