

A young man in a dark polo shirt and jeans stands on a blue trailer. The trailer is loaded with a large yellow tank, a blue tank, and a pressure washer. The background shows a wooded area.

# Steamaway: 28 Years of Quality Service

by Allison Hester, Editor

A young Michael Hinderliter started Steamaway in 1984.

While most high school seniors work minimum-wage jobs for fast food chains, grocery stores and mall shops, Michael Hinderliter decided to start a fleet washing business. Today, almost 30 years later, Steamaway has grown into one of the most recognized and successful fleet washing companies in the nation.

As the son of industry pioneer Robert Hinderliter – who is known as the founder of Rashesco Mfg. Co. DBA Delco Cleaning Systems of Fort Worth and of the Power Washers of North America (PWNA) trade association – Michael was naturally familiar with pressure washing. Fleet washing fit his school schedule, allowing him to work weekends, and provided more income than other part-time jobs.

While fleet washing was a competitive field in 1985, it was different than it is today. “In those days, it was at least harder to get your hands on a pressure washer than it is today,” he explained. “You had to go find a distributor who sold pressure washers, and most of those were hot water. Nowadays, anyone can go

to Home Depot, buy a cheap electric, cold-water power washer and start washing trucks without really knowing what they’re doing.”

Another difference was the lack of environmental concerns. In fact, it wasn’t until 1993 that environmental issues came into play for Steamaway when a potential customer, who had been cleaning their trucks in-house, approached Hinderliter after being approached by the City of Fort Worth with the threat of a fine.

“The company was doing onsite trailer washouts of food material. There was nothing ‘hazardous’ so to speak. They were also using biodegradable soaps,” he explained. “The problem was they were washing out so much food-grade material that it overloaded the neighboring creek and the grass and killed everything in its path.”

Steamaway got the restaurant supplier’s cleaning account and invested \$40,000 into a wash mat and recycle system, which was the early way of doing it. “Nowadays, we do it way more cost effectively. We don’t recycle

the water. We use vacuum systems, sump pumps, damming devices, sand bags – all kinds of ways to dam the flow of the water so we can pick it up – then we send it to the City where they will actually treat it and do what they need to with it,” he explained. “Now I’m not passing increased costs on to my customers due to over-filtering the water.”

As well as learning how to better collect and filter wastewater, Hinderliter has gained a lot of fleet washing insight since his early days, and fortunately, he’s willing to share. Following are some of his pointers:

- **Sell Service, Not Price.** “We don’t play the price game. We focus on service and support. Being a good service provider always means being there when they need you” he said. “Things are going to go wrong. It’s how you deal with the things that go wrong that keeps you in the door.”

Hinderliter said Steamaway is not the highest priced company in his area, and they are not the lowest. They don’t provide high-cost detailing services, but instead have developed an “economical service that’s based on general appearance that the public will see and keeping the drivers happy. Our pricing reflects that. We sell a fair price.”

He adds that over the years, he’s found that a lot of contractors get into the fleet washing business without really understanding the management side of the industry. “They don’t know how to price jobs, they don’t know what their overhead costs are, and they don’t know all the costs that go into getting a job. So they grossly underprice things.”

And, occasionally, Steamaway does lose contracts to lower bids, although more times than not, they eventually get the contracts back. Many of the low-balling companies cannot maintain quality and still make a profit at their low prices, so quality often begins to fade – generally in three to six months. That’s when he often gets the accounts back.



Photo courtesy of Steamaway, [www.Steamaway.com](http://www.Steamaway.com)

“Other companies can beat our price, but no one beats our service,” he said. “That’s how we get our accounts, that’s how we keep them and that’s how we take them back from the competition,” he stressed.

- **Find a mentor.** “For me personally, this has been the most beneficial aspect of my involvement with PWNA,” he added. “It has allowed me to meet other guys around the country who do what I do, who are at the same growth place that I am, and exchange ideas to see how they do it and how it might help me do my job better.”

- **Be willing to give up nights and weekends.** “ALL your weekends,” he stressed,

According to Michael Hinderliter, some companies start out using fleet washing services in-house, but unless the management is really focused on cleaning, it ends up being more of a headache than anything.

“Normally they look at fleet washing as easy work and hire lower-paid employees to do the work, which ends up costing more in the long run. Then their guys clean it wrong, tear up the equipment, or move on to other things, causing the company a lot of headaches. We’re solving the headache. A good cleaning company can actually do it cheaper than if the customer did the work in house.”

# POWERCLEAN 2012



## ORLANDO FLORIDA

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### EDUCATION

Monday, October 22, 2012

8:00 am - 9:20 am | Honda Training

8:00 am - 9:20 am | Cash Flow

9:30 am - 10:50 am | MSDS

9:30 am - 10:50 am | Basi

11:00 am - 12:20 pm | Business Liability

11:00 am - 12:20 pm | Basi

Trade Show 12:30 pm – 4:30 pm

Tuesday, October 23, 2012

8:00 am - 9:20 am | Business Liability

8:00 am - 9:20 am | DOT Hazmat

9:30 am - 10:50 am | Cast Flow

9:30 am - 10:50 am | Email Marketing

11:00 am - 12:20 pm | Blue Prints to Success

Trade Show 12:00 pm – 4:00 pm

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because that's when most fleet washing occurs. However, he pointed out that this allows contractors to gain additional cleaning business during the week. It can also be a good fit for those who prefer to avoid weekend crowds, allowing them to get all their personal errands and such done during the less busy weekdays.

- **Understand and practice environmentally-friendly washing.** He points out that these days, in his area of the country, he's finding that most of his pressure for environmental compliance comes from his customers more so than the environmental agencies. "They don't want to risk bad publicity from being found to be 'polluters,'" he explained. "We are able to sell them on the fact that by using Steamaway, they can have the peace of mind of knowing their fleet washing is environmentally compliant."

- **Choose the cleaning method that works best for you and your customers.** In most instances, Steamaway uses one-step washing, but they also brush – particularly tractors. (See the article on page 5 to learn more about the types of washing.) While two-step cleaning is occasionally used, Hinderliter prefers to avoid the use of harsh acids and caustics. "Although there are plenty of contractors who do use it," and he stresses the market is big enough for all types of cleaning.

His reasoning for one-step and brushing is that "I aim to treat the customers' fleets as I would want my fleet to be treated. The harshness of acids can be too much and can prematurely fade a fleet, so I avoid the use of strong caustics or strong acids, and we promote that as a selling point," he explained.

- **Be on time.** Fleet washing, unlike most types of cleaning, has a very limited and specific window of when it must be done. Don't make someone wait at the gate to let you in.

- **Keep the drivers and mechanics happy.** These are the "go-between" guys for fleet washing crews and generally the ones that they will report to the big boss if they are having problems with the quality of the fleet washing service.

- **Follow up with your accounts regularly.** A general rule of thumb for Hinderliter is to

check in with his customers at least every three months. "Like any service industry, it's a lot more about building relationships than it is about cleaning," he explained. "You've got to visit the customer, and your phone becomes a good friend."

#### • Stay in Contact with Past Customers.

In many cases, customers who've left to try a lower-priced company will come back to Steamaway on their own. However, "some are embarrassed because they let you go. Keep that door open," he encouraged.

#### A Contractor at Heart

It is rare these days that Hinderliter actually goes out into the field. This is due, in large part, to his quality management staff who oversees Steamaway's day-to-day operations, and his well-trained technicians. He has also invested in numerous ways to implement the most efficient service available, including electronic billing, a proprietary database, and iPads for his crews.

Today, Hinderliter has taken his years of experience as a contractor and applied them to his role at PowerWash.com, his distributorship which sells to pressure washing contractors across North America. "It has given me a huge amount of insight and empathy for contractors, and the ability to understand their needs and time constraints," he said.

He also does not turn away his contractor competitors when they need his help. "If they're open minded enough to come by their competition's place and get help, they are pretty smart," he said. "Some competitors won't work with us or buy from us. I think they are actually hurting themselves more than they are hurting us."

Besides, he laughs, "my father's been teaching people for years, which has created plenty of competition."

And while he loves helping contractors, Hinderliter admits that he sometimes wishes he was still out in the field cleaning. "At heart, I am still a contractor. I love that side of the business and I miss it."

*To learn more about Steamaway, visit their website at <http://steamaway.com>. For information about Hinderliter's distributorship, visit [www.PowerWash.com](http://www.PowerWash.com).*

*eClean Magazine*

# July Reader Feedback

"I wanted to let you know that I really enjoy *eClean*. You and your staff do a fantastic job! It is a real pleasure to read the well written, well researched articles. I have forwarded your magazine to four other pressure cleaners who I think will benefit from your magazine. Thank you for such a good resource."

- Jared Barton, Bethany Associates Inc.

"Great article on brick! Well written and spot on for stain diagnosis."

- Craig Harrison, Eco Friendly Pressure Washing

"Was a great read about the brick cleaning. I actually learned some things there!! Thanks for the mag!!"

- Jay, Full Blast Pressure Washing

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