

SPOTLIGHT ON: Hood Cleaning Services

In order to become a full-service fire protection company, many distributors have found themselves branching into unfamiliar fields. When expanding a business, there are important questions to ask and t's and i's to cross and dot. *Firewatch!* is here to help. To make such preparations a little less daunting, this column will spotlight a different product area in each issue. If you'd like to see a field featured, please e-mail tamaram@nafed.org.

Interview with: Jesse Getz, Getz Fire Equipment, Peoria, Illinois

1. When did your company expand into this area of business?

In 1992, after thirty-five years in the fire equipment industry.

2. Why did you decide to expand into this area?

We were receiving a lot of complaints from our suppression customers that they couldn't find good, reliable, and trustworthy kitchen exhaust cleaners. We did a survey of our suppression customers to find out how happy they were with their hood cleaner and if they would be willing to switch providers for better service. The results were that many restaurants were unhappy with their kitchen exhaust cleaning vendor, and they said they would like to change. We then went and spent a lot of time with a friend in the industry, Glenn Floied of Floied Fire Extinguisher & Steam Cleaning in Memphis, Tennessee. Glenn was already doing both fire suppression work and kitchen exhaust cleaning. He gave us invaluable information and training about hood cleaning.

3. How much capital was invested in this new product area?

The initial investment was small to medium. We first purchased a used cargo van and high pressure unit. The total investment minus the vehicle was around \$15,000.

4. Did you need to hire new staff to start working in this area or were you able to train current staff?

We first trained an in-house person who would eventually manage the new division. We then

found a couple people that already had some hood cleaning experience. As the business grew we added more people as needed. After that first crew we didn't necessarily need people that already had experience.

5. Were any licenses or certifications required? What codes, restrictions, and local and federal laws did you have to be aware of?

At the time we started, NFPA was pretty vague concerning kitchen exhaust cleaning requirements. The business owners and insurance companies were the most involved concerning cleanliness requirements. Since then, NFPA has come a long way, and IKECA (International Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning Association) is developing its own ANSI-accredited standard for cleaning.

6. Did you have to expand your insurance coverage to do this work?

Yes, because of increased sales and the work-comp classification of the new work force.

7. Can you briefly describe how this type of work is performed, and what type of products or components are involved?

Starting in the kitchen you prep the area, covering the cooking equipment and creating a plastic "funnel" to catch grease water draining out of the hood. You begin the pressure washing on the roof by cleaning the fan and duct, then move into the kitchen and pressure wash the hood. After the pressure washing you can take down your funnel and wipe out the hood with a towel by hand, scraping or scratching any missed areas of

burnt-on grease. After the hood is cleaned you can begin cleaning any other mess you made in the kitchen with a mop or by hand. Of course, it is much more detailed than that, but that's the basics.

8. How did you research vendors?

We talked to other hood cleaning companies and after one year in the business we joined IKECA. Joining IKECA made a huge impact on our business. We met and made new friends in a new industry. They were open about what products and processes they used, helping propel us to a new level of business.

9. Were there any kinks in implementing this new program? What do you wish you had known or considered beforehand?

Like any new venture there were many kinks in the first few years, and we learned as we went along. We did a lot of research before we started, so I don't know if we would have changed anything.

10. How did you market the service and gain customers for it?

Through our existing suppression customer base. We sent flyers to all of them, letting them know we had started in the business.

11. How long was it before you realized ROI (return on investment)?

Twelve to eighteen months.

12. What advice would you give to other distributors considering an expansion into this line of work?

First, do research into the industry and into what your customers are needing. It is a type of business not many people want to do (and do right). You have to be willing to get in there and get greasy. Early on, the owner or manager will need to be hands-on with the crews until they know what you will expect on every job. Like anything else it comes down to the people. If you have people that can work on their own while still servicing the customer with the highest quality, you'll succeed. ❖