

They're Cleaning Up

Radigan Bros. has been around for four generations, but it has reinvented itself many times

By Meredith Macleod
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AT A GLANCE

Who: Radigan Bros.

Where: Ferguson Avenue South

When: Since 1905

What: Industrial cleaning equipment and supplies, eight employees, supplier to local school boards, Hamilton Health Sciences and many local industries.

The Radigan name has adorned a downtown business for more than 100 years.

It's a remarkable achievement on a number of fronts. First, it has always remained in the Radigan family -- four generations -- but the business has changed course radically since its founding as a furnace-maker in 1905.

Radigan Bros. is now a distributor of industrial grade cleaning equipment and supplies for much of southern Ontario.

Second, while few businesses survive that long, those that do usually get swallowed up by bigger competitors or get so big themselves, that they flee the downtown for larger, greener pastures elsewhere.

Not so with Radigan Bros. The company retains its commitment to Hamilton's downtown in a Ferguson Street building with, perhaps, the oldest working elevator in the city and heavy beams and columns rescued from a railway station that reached 100 years itself before being torn down.

Paul Radigan, owner of the company, is fascinated by the history seen by those 200-year-old beams. They witnessed the hard work of his great-grandfather, grandfather and father. The scratches and gouges of decades of manufacturing in the 17,000-square-foot building is apparent in the original hardwood.

"This building tells a great story. I just love being here," he said.

Another surprise: An industrial cleaning supply company might not be the first place (or even the last) you'd expect to find a We Love Our Customers sign on the door, but there it is.

Then Radigan says something unexpected. The shelves in the showroom are lined with industrial-sized cleaners, disinfectants and soaps in fragrances such as fresh linen, apple and sunburst. But he thinks we use too many heavy-duty cleaners with fragrances and dyes.

"People are way too quick to spray chemicals. I talk more people out of buying stuff than I do selling it. It all ends up down the drain and into the bay.

"I just can't come in here and be excited about selling stuff that is bad for the environment," says Radigan, who has two sons, 25 and 8, and a third child on the way.

There are mops, brooms, buckets, too, but Radigan believes in putting them at the back of the closet. For the past six years, he's specialized in leasing, selling and renting industrial sweepers, scrubbers, polishers and vacuums. They are self-propelled machines that operators walk behind or units ridden like lawnmowers. Radigan Bros.'s primary customers are schools, arenas, hospitals, manufacturers and property management companies.



Cathie Coward, the Hamilton Spectator

Paul Radigan still gets advice from his father because 'no one wants to be the generation running the ... business when it goes down the drain.'

"Cleaning used to be back-breaking work," said Radigan. "Now we can get rid of the mops and buckets and one person can do a whole school or a plant. They clean as fast as you can walk. They can do 26,000 square feet an hour."

That kind of efficiency makes the price tag for the machines -- \$4,000 to \$20,000, depending on size and options -- easier to justify. Radigan also stresses that the machines use much less chemicals and that cleaners have less direct exposure to the cleaners and solutions.

He tried out several lines of machines before settling on the Wisconsin-built Tomcat. Sales are climbing each month.

"Tomcat actually interviews its distributors before taking them on. They like to deal with family businesses looking to sell quality. We fit the mould ..."

Radigan visits each business to evaluate its needs and advise on equipment. Radigan then offers on-site training and servicing for the machines. There is lots of interest in cleaning equipment, especially given increased vigilance about health and safety for workers and liability around slips and falls.

The Radigan name was first hoisted in Hamilton in 1905 when John Radigan, a tinsmith, started making furnaces and lanterns under the banner of John Radigan & Co. John's son, Frank, Paul's grandfather, took over the business and replaced manufacturing with sales of hardware, tools and war surplus metal in the 1920s.

Frank had 10 children and as they grew, four sons joined the business and renamed it Radigan Bros. and assumed control April 1, 1948. Joseph, Paul's father, was the boss, but his brothers Bill, Bern and Jim all had a role.

The postwar building boom led the brothers to selling paint, floor wax, cleaning supplies and the primitive vacuums and floor polishers available then. Their primary customers were contract cleaners and painters.

Unlike most who grow up in a family business, Paul spent little of his time working for his dad. After high school, Radigan was expected to go to university.

His father never pressured him to join the business. Instead, he worked as a summer student at Dofasco, sold clothes at Sears, washed dishes, pumped gas and worked on the assembly line at Camco. Paul got a degree in biology and a medical laboratory diploma. He worked in a lab for a while, but found it confining and isolating. He asked his dad if he could work for the business. That was Dec. 2, 1977.

It was Paul's idea to concentrate on equipment as he felt the company needed to shift away from selling low-margin commodity items to value-added equipment through which the business could build long-term relationships with customers.

Over the years, Radigan bought out his father and uncles. His dad still visits and offers advice now and again.

Radigan has listened because, "No one wants to be the generation running the family business when it goes down the drain."

While Radigan loves his work, there is no automatic paycheque arriving every week.

"Every morning you wake up, you have zero sales, every first day of the month, every Jan. 1. You always have to create value. What happens when the phone doesn't ring? That's the black abyss of self-employment."

Follow your instincts

Biggest challenge: "To change the direction of simply a supply company to an equipment-based one. To change what you are known for... It's a sustainable business now, and we're meeting our big competitors head on. We have thousands of pieces of equipment out there and our service department is booming. The cycle of replacement is setting us up for the next bump of growth."

Biggest surprise: "To be able to go into big areas and compete head-on with ... big-name multinationals, especially in places like Mississauga and Brampton."

Best decision: "To follow my instincts regarding the hiring of good staff, and selling the line of equipment we're proud to sell. Do you know how frustrating it is to sell something you know is substandard? It's horrible."

Worst decision: "The worst decisions are usually failing to do something. It's hesitating. I hired people years ago to sell equipment. Although they were knowledgeable, they didn't have the same philosophy of doing business as we did. That was a learning experience."

Learn the most: "The vendors used to put on two- or three-day training conferences in sales and business practices. There aren't as many as there used to be. I'm a bit of a dinosaur in this industry."

Best advice given: "My father used to say, just because you've had a demonstration or a deal and it hasn't gone through, don't worry. There's your learning for today. You need to experience mistakes. Find out why you didn't get it and learn from that."

Best advice to give: "If you have your heart set on something, be prepared to invest years learning about it. Ignore the negativity. Hard work always pays off, but you have to be prepared to do a 180 (degree turn) when you go down the wrong path."

Secret to success: "Investing in staff and inventory without extending ourselves too much credit-wise. We don't depend on outside financing. My parents grew up in the Depression and learned those lessons."

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