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Reinvention Is Key to Century-Old Family Business

By Rick Howland

In 1916, Woodrow Wilson was President of the United States, the U.S. was a year away from entering World War I and the Boston Red Sox would win the World Series in five games over the Brooklyn Robins (later the Dodgers), with Babe Ruth pitching 13 consecutive shutout innings for the Sox. It also was the year Foley Industrial Engines, an 18-year TCIA associate member company based in Worcester, Massachusetts, was founded.

A national distributor of industrial engines and power-train components, Foley Engines subsequently survived two world wars, the Great Depression, rapidly changing technologies and three generations. At 100 years old, Foley Engines has become the oldest engine distributor in North America, and Foley has been supplying the tree care industry for 40 years.

Because most family-owned businesses rarely last that long, when asked about the secret to the company's success and durability, Jay W. Foley, president and CEO, says, "We reinvent ourselves every 25 to 30 years."

He cites one example nearly 40 years ago, when trucking and telecommunications were deregulated. Not only did that serve to drive down costs, with better, cheaper transportation and communications, it also served to facilitate Foley Engines' evolution from a regional business into a nationally accessible distributor.

For example, Foley says, "Before, we typically would sell only to those who could get here and get home the same day. The building of the Massachusetts Turnpike (built in the mid 1950s) greatly expanded our market. And now we can take a call from anywhere and ship the same day.



The Foley Building circa 1960, above, and as it appears today, with a new hotel going in right next door. Courtesy of Foley Engines.



"Also, we spend a lot of time tweaking customer service, not only with products and services, but also with knowledge we openly share, such as how to install a part and maintain an engine," Foley continues. "So our business is built not on price, but on content.

"People like that we share knowledge and skills. In that way, we gain trust. Communications proves that we know what we are talking about," he says, noting one popular technique, the company's free "Dr. Diesel" tips. "We are not price-driv-

en. With our brand of customer service and deep stocking, the subject of price usually is not the first question," he explains.

Another secret to the company's success, according to Foley, is that, "Regarding customer service, every year we are upping the game. Instead of trying to emulate others in the engine business who think they end a transaction when they get the money, we want to have a long-term relationship with the customer. We benchmark against companies that have done that, such as L.L.

Bean. The customer gets immediate and consistent communication starting the day of their purchase. For example, for an order placed at noon, the customer will have tracking information by 5 p.m. Since we ship the same day an order comes in, one of our mottos is that we will lie down in front of a UPS truck if we have to get the order out.”

During the current generation, according to Foley, the company has witnessed significant changes in the tree care industry. “About 20 years ago, there was a significant shift from gasoline to diesel engines for off-road equipment (chippers, for example).”

At the same time, he says, “Bright young people, men and women, came into the business. They are 50 years old now, but were 30 back then. The industry has changed dramatically and become far more professional, to include better, safer and better-maintained equipment.”

Years ago, much of Foley’s tree care engine and parts business consisted of Ford engines, with Funk PTOs mounted out back. Now, Foley reports, Deutz and Perkins diesel engines, as well as Twin Disc and Rockford PTOs, make up a significant portion, though the company still has healthy demand for older Ford 300 engines.

The company’s 20,000-square-foot facility is located off Interstate 290 in Worcester. Many of the employees boast 20 years of service to Foley. The company specializes in marine and industrial



Jay Foley points to some of his stock of Deutz engines in the warehouse.



While they used to bring vehicles right inside for repairs, today they specialize in speedy parts delivery. Courtesy of Foley Engines.



Jay Foley is shown here in the warehouse with a pair of power-takeoff clutches. The company stocks 600 new and factory remanufactured Perkins and Deutz engines as well as more than 200 Twin Disc power-takeoff clutches. They offer same-day, worldwide shipping.



Their name is Foley Engines, but they are really an engine parts business, says Jay Foley. The clean, white shipping boxes are another way they try to set themselves apart.

engines, replacement parts, marine transmissions, industrial power takeoffs and exhaust scrubbers/purifiers. The company stocks 600 new and factory remanufactured

Perkins and Deutz engines as well as more than 200 Twin Disc power-takeoff clutches. They offer same-day, worldwide shipping.

“What we are seeing in tree care are ever-more-professional businesses using ever-more-complex products. For example, at a recent show I saw a mobile chipper that could travel 50 miles per hour and allows the operator to drive it, essentially commute, right into a storm disaster area,” he recounts. (Albach Diamant 2000 chipper, see Cutting Edge Products, *TCI*, July 2016)

“This is a prime example of how an industry changes,” Foley observes. “As a business, we have to change what we do because our customers change. People are on the Internet now and are more tech savvy than ever, so we as a company have to be much more customer-service oriented than our fathers had to be,” he says. “The old days are gone.”

As far as the future is concerned, Foley has no siblings or children, so his will be the last generation of his family to run Foley Engines. But he isn’t planning to go anywhere anytime soon.

“You want to know what my succession plan is? I go to the gym five times a week!”



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