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The Business Magazine for Spa & Pool Professionals



STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

BUILDER VOICE



DEBRA SMITH

Co-owner and President/
General Manager
Pulliam Pools | Fort Worth, Texas

Texas' venerable pool builder, Pulliam Pools, has been in business since 1916, making it perhaps the oldest pool construction firm on the planet. Co-owner and President/General Manager Debra Smith has been with the company since 1992 and takes pride not only in its unusual longevity, but also its commitment to quality construction and customer service. Here she shares her thoughts about how adhering to fundamental business principles is at the heart of sustained success.

Is Pulliam the oldest pool builder in the U.S.?

We think so, I certainly don't know of one that's been around as long, but we're not 100 percent certain that's the case.

What can you share about the company's beginnings?

They were a concrete company here in Texas building cattle dipping vats. At some point they were asked if they could build pools, they said sure we can and that's how it started. Our oldest project photo is from 1926.

Because our pools have always had a lifetime warranty, we still occasionally work on pools we built as far back as the 1930s and 40s. Not only do we have long-time customers who we've built three or four pools for, we have families who we've worked with for three generations.

How do you describe the changes you've seen since joining the company back in '92?

Things have changed over the years going from being the only game in town here in the [Dallas/Fort Worth] Metroplex to there now being over 400 pool companies in the area. It's a challenge because doing the right thing in this industry with insurance and certifications is expensive. Also, when you warranty your pools, your prices have to be a little higher.

The problem is that with so much competition, we see companies that aren't licensed, don't carry proper insurances, and worst of all, they build projects that have problems. That's given the industry a bad reputation; the familiar used car salesman comparison. We do everything we can to rise above that and change the perception of our company and the industry.

Where does the industry stand with the consumer now in 2014?

We've seen pools evolve with different features and functions, manufacturers that make the bells and whistles and so forth. I believe for builders who are repu-

table and are doing a good job, we have more respect than we've ever had. If you operate based on quality, then you can get your share of the marketplace.

We've always believed that if we take care of our customers and operate in a way that builds confidence, they will feel comfortable referring us to others. And in some cases, they'll come back to us a second, third or fourth time.

In terms of the market right now in 2014, it's been growing and we're seeing a huge upswing. Homeowners are picking up the phone looking for new pools.

What's your formula for success?

We base everything we do on the Golden Rule. That keeps us focused. If we were that customer, how would we want to be treated? Also, if we were that employee, how would we want to be treated? Top to bottom, our business model is based on that basic principle.

It's also why we are committed to representing the top quality in the field. Whenever possible, we want our employees to love us. We want our employees to be happy and want to work here. And we want to contribute to the community and give back however we can. Really, we just want to do the right thing. When you look at business that way, it's not difficult to make the best decisions.

What's your view of the job the industry is doing promoting

the experience of pool and spa ownership?

Most of us are probably familiar with Vance Gillette's mantra about that, and I personally believe he's spot on and it resonates with people. In the past we've certainly talked a lot about how beautiful pools can be and how much they can be enjoyed, but what Vance has argued is that we need to take that to another level.

It's similar to what goes on the consumer's mind when they buy a boat or an RV; they want to invest in the experiences they're going to have, especially as a family. From the moment the homeowner walks into the office, we're working to give them a positive experience, even with small things like giving them coffee mugs and T-shirts. But more importantly, we talk about how we can provide them with something that they're going to love. We've seen that approach work time and time again.

We let the customer know that we're happy that they're there. These days if they bring the kids in, we take their pictures in Pulliam t-shirts and post them on Facebook. The fun family experience starts at the very beginning of the process and continues indefinitely through the life of the pool, which we've seen can be measured in decades and generations.

In terms of homeowner experience, has your company embraced

the features beyond the coping?

Oh gosh, yes! Years ago we started promoting the idea of “build your own station destination.” We build outdoor kitchens, fire features, entertainment areas, anything that will add value to the backyard. These days I’d say just about half of our projects have some type of pergola, barbecue area or a fire pit, something that fits with the design of the pool and the overall home environment.

More and more of our customers are opting for the outdoor amenities because they really want to use their backyard. They see it as an extension of the inside of the home.

Does that motivate your customers to sometimes expand their budgets?

Yes it does. When people come into our showroom, we have an outdoor kitchen with a shade structure, outdoor refrigerator, granite countertop, a fire pit and other features, and we have photos of projects with different combinations of features in different styles. That often gets them to think in broader terms. We hear comments such as, “We were only thinking about a pool, but that would look great in our backyard.”

It’s not unusual for someone to come in thinking they only want to spend \$40 thousand but then fall in love with something and they wind up spending eighty or ninety. They see what’s possible and realize there are amenities they hadn’t thought of yet and they want to expand their ideas.

When it comes to selling the overall environment, if they don’t have that in their mind when they come in, they’re very much thinking about it when they leave.

Do you see that process working with middle class projects, as well as on the high end?

Absolutely! We’ve seen numerous homeowners ask for scaled down versions of an outdoor kitchen, or maybe it’s a different type of coping treatment. It doesn’t matter; homeowners across the spectrum will find a way to purchase what they truly want. That’s why we treat every client the same way in terms of working with them to visualize and appreciate what they can have in their backyard.

How do you go about managing

expectations during the construction process?

First we tell them that we’re going to come in and destroy their yard, but when it’s over they’ll love it. The analogy we use is that it’s like having a baby. When you first get pregnant, it’s exciting and you can’t wait for the baby to be born. But then a little bit later on it’s not so exciting. Pregnancy is uncomfortable, even painful at times and

maybe you’re not that excited about it for a while. But then when the baby is born, you fall in love with it and forget all about the discomfort.

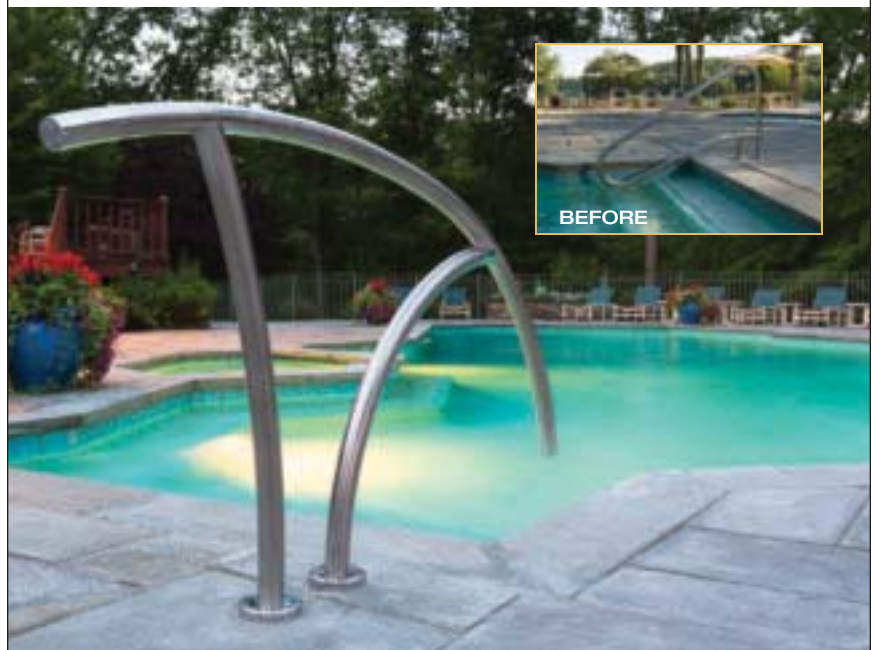
People really do get that analogy. They’ll call up and say the yard is torn up and they’re feeling the labor pains, and we might laugh, but then remind them how happy they’ll be when the project’s finished.

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pectations. Unhappy customers come when they don't know what's going on because you haven't educated them properly. That's why we go to great effort to describe what's going to happen, and we do it over and over again. We have them sign a document confirming that they've been informed about the specific steps. Then when our scheduler gets involved, they go over it again, telling them exactly what's

going to happen and when. And if something changes, we explain that in detail so there aren't any surprises.

We don't want the customer to ever feel like their project has been forgotten or somehow left behind. That's why right after it's sold, we're reaching out to them informing them exactly what to expect. It's a form of handholding that's so important. Our employees know that communication is everything.

One of the issues receiving a great deal of attention these days is the challenge of establishing succession. With Pulliam's long history in mind, what are the keys to continuing to staff your company with enthusiastic employees?

Because we have been around so long, we have employees that have been with us more than 20 years and we take pride in that longevity. How you get there comes down to how you treat your employees, which again gets back to the Golden Rule.

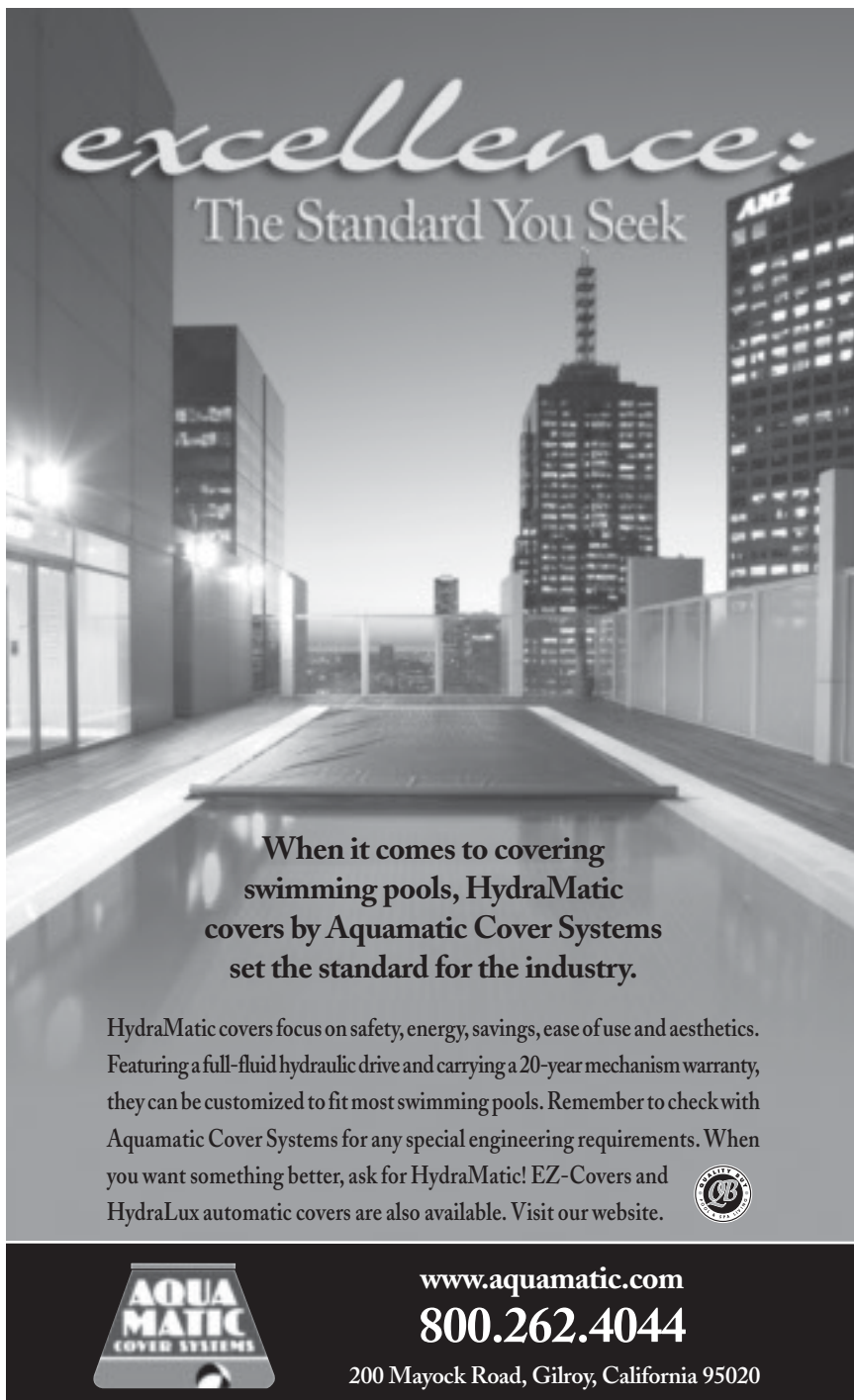
We are also working hard at finding young people who can bring in and train in different areas. With a position like pool designer, they're not a dime a dozen. So, you have to pay them enough so that they are comfortable and inspired, and want to continue learning. Part of keeping good people is all about keeping them educated. That process never stops.

Also, I think there's a generational difference we need to understand. Baby Boomers work long hours often to the detriment of their family life. What I'm seeing now with the younger generation is that they don't want to do that because they've seen the toll it's taken on their parents. As a company we recognized that shift in attitude and make a decision not to work our employees excessively. Sure, it can be a little rough during June and July when we're at our busiest, but generally speaking we're focused on maintaining more manageable hours. We want our employees to enjoy their lives away from work.

Back when I started, we were working 15 hours a day, but now most people aren't willing to do that, which I completely understand. Attitudes and expectations have changed.

Speaking of keeping up with today's generation, what are your feelings about using the Internet and social media as a marketing tool?


We've embraced it and now spend a lot of money to have our name out there and keep it going. I remember when Facebook started to catch on, my first thought was, "What on earth is a Facebook?" But it was obvious more and more people were using it as part of their daily lives, so we put up a Facebook page. I didn't give it much thought




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at first but when I did decide to check it, there was a homeowner inquiring about a renovation.

As it turned out we ended up selling that project and I had to apologize for not responding sooner. That was my own personal lesson, when I realized that people will use social media to buy. Now, we've gotten projects through Houzz and other sites and certainly our website is an important part of our marketing efforts. Now it's not unusual at all for the first contact to be through an online source. It's a necessity now.

Yes, it is an additional job and it requires financial resources and effort. Personal referrals are still the primary way we get leads, but you can't discount these other areas for promotion.

How do you approach difficult issues such as safety or suction entrapment?

Back in 1996 we created a water safety

program in Tarrant County, the first of its kind in that area. It's based on the idea of "water watcher" tags. If you're the person at a gathering wearing the tag, it's up to you to keep an eye on the children in the pool. It was so successful that a number of organizations across the nation are using it, including Safe Kids.

In terms of meeting with the customer, again communication is the key. We talk about safety and recommend measures such as a kiddie fence, if they have small children. When we're done with the pool, we send them a packet of safety information so they're aware of the simple things they can do to minimize risk, most of which comes down to supervision. By informing the customer, we help reduce their anxiety about the risks and give them the information necessary to make their own informed decisions.

As an industry, we can't hide from safety, nor can we force people to do the right thing. We can, however, talk about it in a way that is empowering

and not based on fear.

On the other side of the coin, how do you feel about the joy that you bring to people's lives?

Well that's easy. Just seeing the excitement in people's eyes when they walk in, young and old, it's like they're going to get a big Christmas present.


One of the things we stress to our sales people is that in most cases, these are the homeowners' first pools. Always keep in mind that they're going to be excited and don't forget to share that joy with them.

People have asked, "Don't you ever get tired of your job because it's so stressful?" I tell them, "I love what I do because we have a product that will bring people enjoyment for years and years. How can you feel that's not a great job?!"

It's the best! ~

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