

Three in One

Soltz Paint in New Jersey encompass three businesses that make it one-of-a-kind

Larry Gash, owner of four Soltz Paint and Decorating Centers in New Jersey, describes his operation as three businesses in one.

There's the traditional paint store business, "selling the normal types of products that a paint store sells," he said, such as architectural coatings and spray equipment.

There's also an automotive business that offers automotive OEM coatings and related products to auto body shops, auto dealerships and similar clients.

And there's a marine business, encompassing marine paints and other products, from waxes and adhesives to scrapers and abrasives. This last business, which commands 35 percent of



● The Atlantic City flagship store is across the street from a three-story warehouse.

total sales, caters to the marine construction industry and has as its client one of the largest independent yacht manufacturers in the world.

The automotive and marine businesses, which operate out of the Atlantic City flagship store, have helped Soltz Paint carve out a unique niche in this part of the Jersey shore. But the traditional paint business found at all four stores also sets Soltz Paint apart by virtue of its top-quality products, uncompromising services and expert staff.

Larry noted that the stores work hard to meet customer demand. "We're pretty much all things to all people," he said. "We've been doing this for a long time, and the only time we don't succeed is if (the customer's buying decision) is based only on price."

Soltz Paint has been in continual operation for more than 100 years. It was founded in 1908 by Joseph Soltz, who initially sold paint, glass and ladders. Joseph was joined in the business in the 1930s by his sons, Morris and Abe. The Soltzes eventually dropped glass but brought on other products along the way. One of the most profitable—automotive paints—was added in the 1940s, just as more American households were embracing the idea of the "family car." Also added were art supplies, which have since been discontinued, and wallcovering, which today comprises only a small part of sales.



● Soltz Paint and Decorating Centers has a flagship store in Atlantic City, N.J.

Seymour Gash joined the family business in 1949 after marrying Joseph's daughter, Shirley. Now 88 years of age, Seymour continues to work half days at the store. Larry, their son, came on board in 1976 when the store was adding marine products and heavily targeting boat manufacturers. It also was going after Atlantic City casinos, which had just been legalized. Larry noted that a store co-owner at the time, Stanley Berk, was especially instrumental in tapping into the casino business.

Soltz Paint didn't gain the first wave of paint sales at the casinos, as they were being built, because those were sold direct by the paint manufacturers. But store owners successfully captured the lion's share of repaints by thinking out of the box: They installed tinting machines in the casinos.

As Larry explained, "We put manual tinting machines in each of the casinos at no charge. Then they would buy the bases and colorants from us, and we would provide them with the formulas." To this day, "We have a tinting machine in every casino in Atlantic City, except one," he said.

The recession currently has dampened some of the casino business. With money so tight, casinos are only doing what is "absolutely necessary" to maintain their properties, Larry explained. However, sales haven't disappeared entirely since, "The least expensive thing they can do is paint," he added.

Interestingly, the automotive side of the Soltz Paint business also helped boost casino sales. Larry reported that casinos often use car paint in their décor to achieve more dynamic color. One casino used it on



● More than a century old, the Atlantic City flagship store offers architectural and industrial coatings, marine products and automotive finishes, as well as a lot of memories.

the maids' push carts, for example, while another applied it on awnings.

All of these bold moves caused Soltz Paint to thrive heading into the new millennium and made the Atlantic City store something of a town landmark. The store today retains a lot of its yesteryear charm, with the original wood floors and old-style Victorian architecture, as well as a healthy repeat business. "A lot of people come in and say, 'My grandfather used to bring me in here,'" Larry said. "It's fun to hear the stories."

In 2001, the Soltz family opened its first branch store. According to Larry, the expansion was a way to broaden the product mix, which had begun to be dominated by marine products, and to target new markets. "We decided that we wanted to expand so that we



● The Cape May Court House store, with its beautifully appointed paint department, has a modern feeling.

didn't get pinned against the sea," Larry said.

This second store, located 7 miles away in Somers Point, N.J., sells mostly architectural paint and a smattering of industrial coatings. At 3,000 square feet, the store currently is the smallest of all the Soltz Paint locations but handles the most sales transactions in a day. The store is situated on a busy street near high-end neighborhoods and is the only

store of its kind in the area. It also is the only Soltz Paint store to have a designer on staff—an expert on color who offers in-home consultations.

Soltz Paint opened another branch store in 2003 in Cape May Court House, N.J. Larry and a co-owner at the time, Brian Meyers, built this third store from scratch after tearing down the existing home on the lot. Featuring a modern structural design and striking white-and-blue exterior facade, it stands in stark contrast to the century-old flagship store.

In 2007, Larry opened another "modern paint store," as he said, in an existing plaza in Winslow Township, N.J. Designed with the help of his paint suppliers, the Winslow store features a contemporary paint scheme, layout and store fixtures. The store,

with 5,200 square feet of space and a range of architectural and industrial coatings, enabled Soltz Paint to button down a much larger market area.

"We were afraid that if we didn't push out a little further, we'd be limited," Larry said. "So we opened up in Winslow Township, which is 15 miles east of Philadelphia and 40 miles from Atlantic City. What that store has enabled us to do is deliver throughout Philadelphia and into



● The Somers Point store has a design expert on staff, Char Sternberger, shown here with Larry Gash, Soltz Paint owner.

Delaware and as far as Trenton, N.J. So there's a lot we can service that we couldn't service before," he said.

Larry said that having four locations "is definitely a plus" in that they allow customers to conveniently access a Soltz Paint store from a greater geographic area. "Painters like a store they can get to easily, as do homeowners," he said. "And going to the Atlantic City store wasn't always convenient for them."

Of course, there have been challenges over the years in growing the business, Larry said, and moving it

from a "family" to a "business" orientation. One of the biggest has involved inventory management. "In a multi-store operation, there's only so much money you can devote to inventory," Larry explained. "A major challenge is having the right amount of inventory in the right place at the right time."

Larry noted that keeping up with inventory was a lot easier in the early 1900s. "In the old days, Joseph would go to the train station to pick up a delivery of wooden ladders and bring them back in a horse-drawn wagon. Then, tractor trailers brought them

back. Now, ladders are only a small piece of our business. They've gone from wood to aluminum to fiberglass ladders, and once you buy a fiberglass ladder, you (rarely) need another one," Larry said.

Today, Soltz Paint offers a full slate of technologically superior products in all three businesses. The stores constantly strive to offer the latest products on the market, from the newest generation of "green" architectural coatings to more efficient marine construction products to after-market car finishes.

To sell all of these products, Larry said that he has one of the most professional staffs anywhere—a statement supported by testimonies from satisfied customers. "Contractors say our staff is best, and it's true," he said. "We have up-to-date products and our people are knowledgeable about them."

When Larry eventually retires, his staff will take over as part of an employee stock ownership program (ESOP). Larry's daughters have other careers and aren't interested in becoming the fourth generation of owners. But as part of their retirement plan, employees receive a portion of shares according to their salary. Essentially, the plan is "an exit strategy with vesting involved," Larry said. "Eventually the goal is for the ESOP to own the business 100 percent."

Meanwhile, Larry's plan for success going forward is to continue to be a market leader, even in the current economy. As the recession has worn on, the Soltz Paint staff has taken a hard look at the inventory and worked hard to be even more cutting edge in each business category. "We want to make sure that what we're doing is right and that we have the right products," Larry said.

"We've tried to think in terms of, 'What if I were starting a paint store today? What would I be doing and what would I not be doing? What would I be selling and what would I not be selling?' We're trying to be innovative and to stay on top." ■



● The Cape May Court House store was built from scratch and features contemporary architecture and a striking exterior paint scheme.