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TartanSupply



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Tartan Supply

Milwaukee, WI

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Tartan Supply

Started In 1976

Full Line Janitorial Distributor Serving Milwaukee Area

By Rick Mullen
Maintenance Sales News Associate Editor

Craig Schuler, Sales Consultant; John Devere, Regional Sales Manager; Ben Dorschner, Sales Manager; Peter Devere, Owner/CEO; Diana Myre, Sales Support/Marketing; and, Robin Dorschner, President.

“In the past, people would just place orders when they called. We have worked in developing a much more hands-on approach, because the demands of the customers have increased dramatically.”

— Regional Sales Manager
John Devere

Tartan Supply was founded by Peter Devere, the company’s current CEO, in 1976 in Butler, WI, a suburb of Milwaukee. The company was later relocated to its current facility in Brookfield, WI, just south of Butler in the Milwaukee Metro Area.

“Prior to founding Tartan Supply, I had been with Clarke® for nine years and then moved to Milwaukee, which was my home, to start the business,” Devere said.

“In Peter’s years with Clarke, he grew and developed territories in Milwaukee, Louisiana, Dallas, TX, and Los Angeles, CA,” Tartan President Robin Dorschner said. “He recorded outstanding sales numbers and successes wherever he went. After doing that for nine years, he sold his house in California for seed money and returned to Milwaukee.”

Today, Tartan Supply is a full-service janitorial supply distributorship offering chemicals, floorcare equipment, equipment repair and cleaning supplies. Tartan’s cleaning offerings include paper products, can liners, squeegees, buckets, mops, brooms, wood and hard floor products and proportioning equipment. A major emphasis at Tartan Supply is its equipment repair operation.

Tartan Supply’s management team consists of Peter Devere and his three sons, Robin Dorschner, Regional Sales Manager John Devere and Sales Manager Ben Dorschner. A fourth member of the management team is Sales Support/Marketing Manager Diana Myre.

“Peter (Devere) founded the company and took it to a very high level of success,” Robin Dorschner said. “He built this business from nothing, with only his vision, hard work and sales skills to rely on. We have the advantage of starting at a point further along the racetrack. The challenge for us is to use this speed and position to propel our company to new heights.”

Because each member of the management team comes from a different background and has varied areas of expertise, Tartan can boast strong leadership in several aspects of operating the distributorship.

“Robin (Dorschner) has quite a bit of experience in Tartan’s service department. He has a specialized background in that part of the business,” John Devere said. “My strength is in teaching applied cleaning science, having worked for years conducting training as a regional sales manager for a major chemical manufacturer on the East Coast. Ben (Dorschner) is our concrete floor system specialist. He was general manager for a concrete coating and diamond polishing company out of Florida for a number of years.

“Hopefully what we are amassing are individuals with a lot of hands-on experience who can work with customers directly to develop good relationships, which is a critical element to success.

“In developing relationships, we feel it is a major advantage to have Diana (Myre) on the inside. In the past, people would just place orders when they called. We have worked with (Myre) in developing a much more hands-on approach, because the demands of the customers have increased dramatically. It is very complicated now in terms of the information that is demanded.

“In a nutshell, we have people who can bring expertise to the field, and then we have very knowledgeable people inside who can provide customers with the information that they demand.”

Myre added: “Everyone on the management team brings something different to the table, which is one of our strengths.”

Thus far, Tartan’s management team approach, under the watchful eye of Peter Devere, has been successful as, despite economic hard times in recent years, business has been “excellent.”

“Traditionally, we have been very strong in servicing equipment and we have been working very hard on the chemical and the paper side of the business — the every week type of sales items,” John Devere said. “As a result, sales of these products have been extremely strong. When it comes to sales of used equipment, as soon as we get a piece of equipment in, it is pretty much out the door. We are also seeing new equipment sales getting stronger as the economy is picking up.



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Circle 29

The great thing is that we have been spending a lot of time on the basic commodity business.”

While Tartan’s robust equipment servicing department has remained strong over the years, the distributorship’s primary customer base has shifted away from the industrial segment.

“Schools and universities have been areas where we have picked up more business, as opposed to the industrial market,” Ben Dorschner said. “Historically we have been an industrial distributor, and we haven’t lost sight of the industrial segment. But, when industry leaves the neighborhood, you have to source business elsewhere. We have had to diversify and find niches in other areas that we feel will fuel growth.”

Robin Dorschner added: “In addition to the educational segment, we have also seen growth in the retail and building service contractor marketplace. It has been no accident that we have targeted these areas and have worked very hard to make them a more robust offering in products and services.”

In ramping up its efforts to serve new growth markets, Tartan’s management team is committed to building what Ben Dorschner calls “old-school” personalized relationships.

“We are not just a ‘better price’ distributorship,” Ben Dorschner said. “We are a better price company that incorporates the hands-on approach, bringing product knowledge and the ‘how to’ to the table to meet the needs and wants of our customers.”

John Deverej added: “Some of us have more experience in certain segments than others. We strive to work together to leverage one another’s knowledge in these areas, incorporating the same hands-on, relationship building approach for all the markets.”

When it comes to servicing equipment, Tartan has evolved this portion of the business well beyond most traditional distributorships.

“In the area of profitability, we are unique and very strong compared to many companies in the area of service,” Peter Deverej said. “We have 11 full-time people (nearly half of the company’s full-time staff) who do nothing but service the equipment we sell. One of my favorite quotes is, ‘I’ve been in this business 45 years, and I have yet to see a customer bid on a broken down machine.’”

Before becoming president of Tartan, Robin Dorschner was intimately involved in growing the equipment service department.

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"When I started in the department in 1998, we had two brands we serviced and we were entertaining the notion of a third," Robin Dorschner said. "I was sent to meet with, and explore, some larger service operations at friendly distributorships around the Midwest that Peter (Deverey) knew through a networking channel. I was amazed they could service 20-plus different brands. I made this a priority for our service department early on. Today, we have nearly 40 manufacturers that trust us to provide warranty service, parts and repair services for their machines."

Among Tartan's equipment service customers are a diverse group of about six well-known national retailers.

"It is a story that we don't broadcast enough, but we but we quietly provide the behind-the-scenes facility operations support for six highly recognizable national retailers. In many cases, we handle highly-specialized and unique services that larger companies just aren't interested messing around with, both in the equipment service segment, and also on the supply side," Robin Dorschner said.

As Robin Dorschner developed the service department, more facility space was dedicated to the operation.

"We just kept knocking down walls and pushing things back to make room for the service operation," Robin Dorschner said. "You cannot provide the type of service that major national retailers require without investing the resources of space and people toward this effort. I would venture to say about 45 percent of our building is devoted to service as opposed to sales and warehousing."

Tartan also has the capability of going to a customer's location to make equipment repairs. The company's mobile technicians are factory trained and capable of servicing all brands



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CSR/Service Billing



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Tech Support/Parts



Linda Cekosh
Service Coordinator



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"Our retail customers usually want their equipment fixed quickly and on site," Robin Dorschner said. "In this economy, as capital budgets have shrunk or have not been renewed, many customers have been forced to repair machines or purchase used equipment. These areas have remained strong through dips in new equipment sales."

Ben Dorschner added: "One thing I often hear from our customers is, 'You guys maintain such a massive parts inventory that I always get a quick turnaround.' Our service vans are basically mobile parts warehouses. When our technicians are out in the field doing repairs, the turnaround is very quick."

A 'Smile' Over The Phone

Whether it is selling products, providing training, equipment repair, customer service, or any other aspect of Tartan's operation, the commitment to establishing personalized relationships with customers is the foundational theme. This applies to the sales person or delivery driver or repair technician in the field as well as "inside" people.

"We want to be more than just a computer screen or a phone call," John Deverey said. "The relationship side of the business is what we try to establish, not just on the phone or through e-mail, but in person."

In describing Tartan's vision as the management team takes the company into the future, Ben Dorschner said, "We have taken the approach that ultimately it is a people business."

"Everybody has a product, a price and a box to move. We have asked ourselves the question, 'What can we do differently?' The answer is, 'We are in the people business.' We earn business, based on our hands-on approach, by continually training in the field. With each of us coming from a different background, we bring that unique expertise into the picture. We can all rely on each other. It is a joint effort."

Myre added: "We are not happy just to have satisfied customers. We want loyal customers, and this comes from building relationships. We want them to keep coming back. We know if they are just satisfied, they will go anywhere and just shop for prices. It is all the extras that we bring that make us unique."

Robin Dorschner reiterated the concept that one of Tartan's long suits is taking care of the customer over and above just selling a product.

"You can get a scrubber from 10 different places by tomorrow on the Internet. But, who is going to be there overnight doing a job with you and tying that scrubber in with the chemicals or the finish it takes to complete the task in the best way possible?" he said. "Who is going to have a service technician there early in the morning or on the weekend when the machine breaks down? — Tartan will."

The high level of interaction with customers to help them, on a person-to-person level, meet their needs in the field, also translates to the inside customer service effort.

"We don't have caller ID here, but we make it a point to get to know our customers so well that we recognize their voices when they call," Myre said. "We have had several customers tell us that when they call us, it sounds like a 'smile' over the phone."

While Tartan emphasizes personal one-on-one relationships

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and hands-on partnerships with customers, it is still a fact that in the modern-day distributor industry maintaining an online presence has some benefits.

"We realize people are going online more now and searching for prices. Therefore, we have online ordering for our customers," Myre said. "However, we think our approach is different than other distributors in that we change the text on our website every month. There is a personal message from me. We have a blog where customers can gain information, and we are constantly posting specials."

"We have an online photo album where people can see customers and their facilities where we have done a great job. It really makes a difference. We just don't sell products, we are a resource."

Tartan also solicits feedback and testimonials from customers. The company conducts a yearly survey to gain information about how customers view Tartan's services.

"We are constantly seeking to give our customers the 'wow' factor," Myre said. "Such things as referrals, testimonials and customer surveys help us make sure we are reaching this goal."

Tartan's hands-on approach is evident in all aspects of the company's culture, including making routine deliveries something special for customers.

"We have our own truck. We see the value in giving customers personalized attention from the same driver who sees the same customer week and after week," Robin Dorschner said. "He knows the customers by name and he is able to recognize any nuances in their order."

"Everyone in our company is committed to providing 'white glove' treatment to customers. It doesn't matter what an employee's title is, whether it is truck driver, forklift operator or purchasing, everyone's title ends with 'customer service.'"

"It is all about customer service. Yes, we want our truck driver to drive safely, obey the laws of the road and to be able to load and unload properly, but he also knows that an equally important aspect of his job is to make customers feel valued and important by being attentive to their needs."



Service Technician Paul Thomas works in Tartan's equipment service department.

Taking The Consultative Approach

One of the ways modern distributorships distinguish themselves from large "box" stores is the value-added services they bring to the table. At Tartan, value-added takes several forms, from actual hands-on experiences with customers to communicating by phone, fax, e-mail or online.

Value-added can also include the attitudes and philosophies a company may embrace. At Tartan this can be translated into the company's commitment to partner with customers as opposed to being just order-takers.

In the partnering relationship with customers, Tartan takes the consultative approach. One of the unique ways Tartan offers sound, reliable information and advice to customers is by actually field testing the products it offers. Tartan also consults with customers by giving them a variety of choices in any given situation.

"We are about giving customers a variety of options, using products and procedures that we know work well in a given situation because we have field tested them personally," Ben Dorschner said. "This is in contrast to just dropping off 12 free samples and then leaving customers to fend for themselves."

John Devery added: "I think, as a company that purveys knowledge, it is important to give customers good choices. It is also important to not always speak in terms of absolutes, because customers have unique situations."

"For example, it is not always wise to say, 'This is the one and only ultimate greatest product that is going to solve all your problems.' It is more beneficial to gear

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— Sales Support/Marketing Manager
Diana Myre

customers toward appropriate options and working with them to find out what works the best in their situation. This seems to be an approach our customers appreciate.”

One of the important ways Tartan puts its partnership/consultative philosophy into practical application is its training programs.

“When it comes to training, we cater to the customer,” Ben Dorschner said. “For example, if a school tells us it would like quarterly training on green cleaning, we implement a training program based on the school’s schedule, first and foremost.”

Dorschner also explained that oftentimes Tartan will implement a training program, such as for green cleaning, taking an incremental approach.

“We try to look at one specific environment at a time, such as restrooms,” he said. “This

keeps retention where we need it. After we cover restrooms, we will move on to another environment. We also tie training into seasonal needs. Facilities get a lot of salt residue in the winter, therefore we will train and consult concerning entrance matting or carpet extracting or spotting, etc. It is ultimately based on the customer’s need.”

Training is also an important aspect of Tartan’s equipment service operation, both locally and on the road.

“We have flown countless times around the country to provide training,” Robin Dorschner said. “Our major retail customers may tell us they need us to conduct training at their facility at 5 a.m. on a Monday morning. They may need us on a Saturday night at the time of a shift change. Whenever and wherever they need us, we will be there in force.”

Robin Dorschner also explained that Tartan conducts basically two types of training. The company trains the end-user — the person who is using the products and performing the tasks. A second type is the training of supervisors, so they, in turn, can train their people.

Training also extends to Tartan’s internal staff as well, as Myre explained: “I just don’t answer the phone and take an order. If somebody can’t get a hold of Ben (Dorschner), for example, they know they can count on me to have product knowledge. I am able to consult with a customer on what items work for them. I attend the meetings and I know how products work. It is not just answering the phone.”

Many times when a person calls a large service providing company with a maintenance problem, the person who answers the phone simply passes the information down the line, according to Robin Dorschner.

“It is basically like talking to a waitress or waiter who just takes the order, says ‘thank you,’ and sends it on its way,” he said. “One of the benefits for our machine equipment customers is when they call they are going to be speaking with a highly qualified technician who has more than 10 years experience on the road and who knows them and their equipment.

“Our technician can help trouble-shoot over the phone, possibly eliminating having to make a service call. Many retailers, once they see our capacity, realize this is a significant benefit and they use it accordingly.”

Tartan employees, inside and out, live by the credo that they are there to serve and train customers in a helpful and personable manner, not to simply dazzle them with their expertise.

“When we are training people, we are not there to present ourselves in a grandiose manner with our own knowledge,” John Devere said. “We are there to take something complicated and break it down into a simple step-by-step analysis — to actually teach.

“This is an important part of

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training; to keep it simple and hands-on and not to try to convey so much information that everything gets lost in the shuffle. We want to actually accomplish something. This approach has served us very well, and customers certainly appreciate it.

"We also make it a priority to spend time focusing on the customer's safety. It is important that they get results, but it is critical that their own safety is taken care of as best as possible."

Robin Dorschner added: "There is an old saying, 'People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.' When John (Deverey) recently conducted floor resurfacing training at a major state university for two consecutive shifts of maintenance workers — all night until the sun came up the next morning — I don't think there was any manager on staff who doubted his attention to detail and concern for their success.

"Our main commodities are expertise, knowledge and hands-on training. This is what we see ourselves as distributing."

The period of time in which we live has often been called the Information Age. Technologies such as cell phones and computers put a vast amount of information at people's fingertips.

As John Deverey pointed out, this means there is much good and useful information to be had, but there is also a lot of bad information out there. The abundance of bad information makes Tartan's expertise and knowledge even more valuable, especially when combined with the hands-on approach.

"I hear the comment quite often that we are one of the few companies that will come out into the field and do something physically — apply a cleaner, lay some finish, spend some time with customers," John Deverey said. "With all the technology in this new modern era, we still try to focus on the 'old school' approach of actually doing something with customers and not just telling them how to do it."

The hands-on, consultative approach also pertains to how Tartan promotes environmentally friendly products and applications.

"There are two things the customer wants to know about a green product — does it work as good or better than what I am using? And, why is it important to me?" Ben Dorschner said.

As in other applications, Tartan field tests green products it offers to make sure they are able to meet customers' needs.

"We just don't take the word of a manufacturer that a green product is 'great,'" Ben Dorschner said. "If we haven't tested a product thoroughly ourselves, we won't sell it."

Tartan also promotes green products in terms of personal health and safety issues, more so than emphasizing ecological concerns. This approach seems to better resonate with customers.

In addition to giving customers the assurance that the green products Tartan sells have been field-tested to make sure they work, the company has also taken customers on a tour of a local manufacturer of cleaning chemicals.

"A few months ago we took a number of customers on a tour set up by a local manufacturer," John Deverey said. "We wanted to show people how chemicals are manufactured, sourced and a number of other things.

"Nowadays, most of the popular standard glass cleaners, neutral cleaners, and spray and wipes are only being offered in green formats. We are selling a tremendous amount of green products. We still have the specialty needs where customers desire the more traditional products, but most of what we are selling is green products."

Tartan's expertise and product knowledge, in conjunction with being a member of a large buyer's group, has allowed the company to operate with less warehouse space. A smaller warehouse translates into savings in several areas, including heating and lighting and maintenance costs. Also, fewer employees are needed, which saves labor costs.

"For the past 20 years, we have been a partner in a buyer's group that operates 3 massive distribution centers," Robin Dorschner said. "These distribution centers

"I think, as a company that purveys knowledge, it is important to give customers good choices. It is also important to not always speak in terms of absolutes, because customers have unique situations."

— Regional Sales Manager
John Deverey

"There is an old saying, 'People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.' ... Our main commodities are expertise, knowledge and hands-on training. This is what we see ourselves as distributing."

— Tartan President
Robin Dorschner

are, essentially, our auxiliary warehouses. For our national accounts, we can ship direct from these locations. This makes them happier customers because they save on freight. Gone are the days when it was a necessity to have a large warehouse.”

Another way Tartan has cut down on warehouse space is by only stocking items that have been proven to be effective.

“We have applied our principles of being hands-on and bringing a level of expertise to the table to our warehouse operation,” John Devereey said. “Why stock 14 products that all are supposed to do the same thing and only 2 of them work? We are trying to stock only the 2 that work.

“Instead of having overlap and unnecessary items, that also wastes the customer’s time, we are trying to focus on the products that do the job correctly the first time, and only market those.”

Always Tell The Truth

In Peter Devereey’s office above his desk, there is a plaque with a quote attributed to Mark Twain that reads: *“Be truthful: If you tell the truth, you don’t have to remember anything!”*

At Tartan Supply, Mark Twain’s quote isn’t just a nice-sounding platitude; it is perhaps the foundation of the company’s ongoing success.

“Peter (Devereey) established himself as a reputable businessman whose word is golden,” John Devereey said. “Many times customers take a leap of faith when they decide to do business with a distributor. Our word as business people has been key to our success and allows us to continue.”

Robin Dorschner added: “We have the most diverse group of intelligent and capable people that we have ever had in my

**“If we haven’t tested
a product thoroughly
ourselves, we
won’t sell it.”**

— Sales Manager Ben Dorschner

tenure here at Tartan Supply. We have empowered them to run their divisions and flex their wings. Management sets the course, and then we just try to stay out of their way.

“We have shifted during the past several years from a culture where we had a master salesman at the top of the pyramid, and below him was a very small group of people — I like to refer to them as the ‘keepers of knowledge.’ Below that group there was a revolving door of people — temporary employees — who weren’t rewarded or given enough fulfilling responsibilities to want to stick around and make their job a career.

“We have tried to flatten that out and bring in people who have the experience or education that will benefit our business in specialty areas such sales, logistics, purchasing, service, marketing and customer support people.

“We have more people with significant industry experience and more people with relevant higher education degrees on our staff now than we ever had in the past. This has been by design; it is no accident. The payoff is here to be seen. Across the board, our extremely talented staff is able to serve our customers in new ways and with new technologies like never before.”

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