

Old-school dad and new ways of son keep APC Equipment rolling

By Lee Allen

Inside Tucson Business

Like father, like son? For sure - but sometimes it takes a bit of discussion and dissension before consensus is ultimately achieved. That's because George French, founder of APC Equipment Company, is old school and looks at things through the eyes of experience, while son Kris, a graduate of the Eller College of Management, brings a modern perspective to problem-solving. Together they make their 22-year-old company work smoothly.

"Our discussions can get heated," says the firm's patriarch, "but we quickly come to a resolution that works for both of us. The 'we've done it this way for years and I see no reason to change' theory doesn't work. It changes anyway and I can see the changes are smart ones. You can only be stubborn for so long and when I see the old ways are not working, I look forward to a new approach."

To which his 27-year-old son agrees, adding: "We may go round and round on an issue, but we ultimately find a middle ground to solve any problems." There's been a lot of problem-solving since the firm began in 1986. Now, according to the elder French, "We're the largest trailer dealer in Southern Arizona, building and selling all types of trailers."

The firm began by offering construction equipment sales to contractors - graders, bulldozers, cement mixers and utility trucks and trailers, whatever contractors were in need of. When car dealerships got into the used truck market, APC began to concentrate exclusively on trailers. "We get people moving into Tucson from all parts of the country where they may not have had room for our type of product. Here they may have an acre or so and want a toy, a trailer, a quad, a dune buggy, or a boat that all need to be hauled on something, and we fill that need.

"Because of the current economy, our contracting sector is down a bit, but with all the other things we do, like our repair service, there's been no problem with business. Despite the economic slump, we're still doing really good," the senior French says.

To the tune of some impressive numbers: "Last year we did close to a thousand units, sales that translate to over \$4 million in revenue," says George. "Our goal this year is to beat that number." And while the primary market is one unit at a time to local customers, APC also chases federal government bid requests all over the country. "Our largest customer is the U.S. Border Patrol," he says. "We make their trailers for pretty much all Arizona needs and with border patrol and homeland security continuing to grow, we sell more and more units in this sector."

Although they market and sell trailer products in many parts of the country, father and son emphasize that this is still a local family-owned/family-operated company. Father French is Tucson-born at St. Mary's Hospital, and a graduate of Palo Verde High School. "We're the only Tucson-born company in this industry that's not a franchise," says Kris. "We stand behind our product. We've been here for awhile and we'll be here for the long haul. A return customer is the best word on the street you can ask for - and we've got lots of those."

The closest thing that resembles an actual company mission statement is how George French runs his company. "We treat everybody the way we want to be treated. We give honest advice about what will fill a client need. If you're pulling with a Volkswagon tow vehicle, you don't want a 10,000-pound trailer. We make sure we sell trailers that fit the actual need."

There's been a lot of different needs over the years with about a dozen units achieving 'most-popular' status. Each unit is important, but the firm's founder likes the creativity of special design/special build challenges. "Anything that can be pulled," he says. "We design-build at our southside location where we have more room. This sets us apart from everybody else in town that sells a standard line of trailers. We give customers exactly what they want; whether it's a goofy size or something strange looking, we can accommodate those needs by building units one at a time."

And over the years, he has. "We've made trailers for handicapped equipment, motorized parachutes, motorized hang gliders, units for helicopters, and even one for a scaled-down model of the USS Tucson submarine. We also did a trailer for a wildlife photographer who crawls into the unit like a camo blind and stays there for days shooting pictures. Just being able to say we've built trailers for helicopters and submarines ought to set us apart from anybody else."

As to the future, "When I arrived, the idea was for dad to semi-retire, but we ended up way too busy for that to happen," says Kris. "So instead we opened up a second location two years ago. We've rebuilt our website which now has 30-40 pages of product options. And despite the current low end of the business cycle, we're trying harder to be competitive and things are already starting to pick up."

Says its founder: "We're always going to have a good share of business in our industry, so rather than retire completely, I'd like to stay on as a highly-paid advisor."

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Sells a variety of utility trailers for all purposes. They have more than 400 trailers in stock between the two locations and if none are right, they will design and build a custom trailer to fit the client's needs.

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