

September 18, 2011

(c. 485,160)

SEPTEMBER 18, 2011

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE

Money&Careers

ON THE HOT SEAT

Cleaning up despite the downturn

Mark Kushinsky,
chief executive, MaidPro

After several unsatisfactory experiences with home cleaning services, including the time a maid locked his cat Foo in the bathroom without a litter box, Mark Kushinsky quit his job as a Jordan Marsh store manager and cofounded MaidPro in 1991. Twenty years later, the Boston company is responsible for cleaning a half million homes a year. It has 120 franchises nationwide and \$50 million in annual revenue. Kushinsky spoke with Globe reporter Katie Johnston recently.

When were a kid, did you love cleaning the house? Not even remotely.

Did revenues take a hit during the downturn? We were actually the only residential cleaning franchisor to grow our cleaning revenues every single year during the recession.

How do you know? The FTC [Federal Trade Commission] regulates the franchise industry. And one of the requirements is that we have our business audited and publish

those publicly. So we review all of our competitors' information.

It seems like housecleaning is a luxury people might cut back on.

It would seem that way to me, too, but I've found the type of people that use house cleaning services on a regular basis, it really is more like a necessity to them. They won't cut their cable bill, they're not going to cut their cellphone, and they don't cut their residential cleaning service.

The Massachusetts Legislature is considering a bill that would give franchisees greater legal protections, but a lot of parent companies think it would hurt their business. What's your take?

I think what's in place now is fine. Sometimes legislation such as this can cause more problems for the franchisees than those drafting it may initially think.

How so? There's one stipulation that says the franchisee must take action on a franchisee if they're doing something [wrong] no later than 180 days. We just had a franchisee. His wife got diagnosed with

cancer and within three months, his son got diagnosed with cancer. This is a 30-year-old guy. I had to make decisions about leniency in certain areas to make sure his business could survive. If I was forced to do something within a 180-day rule, I would have been forced into having to do something.

You developed software that scheduled clients and routes more efficiently, eliminating about half the miles cleaners had been driving. How does that financial savings trickle up to you?

When we were able to reduce miles driven, that reduced the amount of time people were driving from home to home, which allowed us to offer the people cleaning another job. Because of that, we could now pay them more, and since we could pay them more, turnover went down by about 20 percent.

Do you ever hear crazy stories about what cleaners see in people's homes?

We're publishing a book. I'll give you one example. We had a note to let the dog out in the backyard. We let the dog out and

there was a pool and the dog had fallen into the pool. The cleaning person jumped in after the dog and supposedly saved the dog. Later we come to find out that the homeowner is like "The dog swims all the time, it's no problem."

What's the book?

It's "Behind the Clean." Every business has their fun stuff that goes on. I'll tell you another story. We had the keys to a customer's home, we cleaned it monthly. And they moved. And they never told us they moved. New people moved into their house and along comes their monthly cleaning day. We go in and open their door and clean their entire house. And we leave a nice thank you note. [The new owners] opened their door, and they looked around and they were shocked. Who would come into our house? It's all clean and everything's put away. And finally they come around in the kitchen and they see the note, MaidPro. Those people actually ended up signing up for service.

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