

Father and Son Team Blanketing Kentucky With Service

by Ranger Kidwell-Ross

For the first time ever, our Featured Contractor for this month is not one company, but two. Lexington Pavement Sweep was founded in the late 1980s by Jim Blackerby, Jr., with the goal of serving the Greater Lexington, Kentucky, market area.

By contrast, Louisville Pavement Sweep was founded by his son, Jim Blackerby III, only about a year-and-a-half ago. This is, in large part, the story about how a sweeping contractor of high ideals has inspired his son to follow in his footsteps.

In that sense, it is a story with more aspects of success than our typical Featured Contractor interview. To make it easier to keep track of which is which, the elder Jim Blackerby is called by the name of “Jim,” and his son is called “Jimmy,” which is what his dad and others in their family call him.



As Jim was growing up, his grandfather owned and managed a shopping center in Lexington. When his grandfather became too old to continue managing, Jim’s father and aunts took over the task. “My dad handled the construction-type work on the center.” said Jim, “At one point, I saw how much we were paying to have the parking lot cleaned and suggested that I handle keeping the parking area clean. At the time, I went out with a bucket and my bare hands and picked up anything and everything that was on the lot.”

Once he started going to college, though, Jim decided he didn’t want to continue with the job. Then, after he completed his education Jim got married and had three children. He also became a stockbroker for Dean Witter and, at that point, no doubt thought his days of cleaning parking lots was over.



However, in about 1988 Jim thought it would be a way to make a little extra money so offered to take back the cleaning effort on the shopping center parking lot. After all, he figured, all he had to do was get up an hour early and get the job done before he went to work.

Then, one day one of his Dean Witter clients called and told Jim he'd heard that he was cleaning a parking lot. "Frankly," said Jim, "I didn't know what to say. When I told him it was true, to my surprise he asked if I would be interested in doing the same for the shopping center he managed."

It wasn't long before word about how meticulous Blackerby was in doing the job reached the ears of another Witter client, who asked him if he'd be willing to handle parking lot cleaning for his very large center, as well. When Blackerby decided to say yes, he knew he'd need to buy a sweeper.

"I always intended that my parking lot cleaning activity would just be a part-time venture," said Jim. "Or, if it took off I figured I would just hire a manager to run the business. The business really took off, though, and I found that it was the stock broker job that I quit."

Lexington Pavement **S W E E P**

Blackerby started out with a small Innovator-brand sweeper. Then, two or three years later, after talking to Nite-Hawk Sweepers' Tracy Day at a National Pavement Exposition and then seeing how well the Nite-Hawk operated even though they were a single-engine machine, he switched to those and has never looked back.

Jim's son, Jimmy, started working at his dad's sweeping company when he was a sophomore in high school, then continued on through college. "One of the many things I've learned from my dad," said Jimmy, "is the importance of taking pride in my work and providing an exemplary level of service at every single account. When you do that, you have an opportunity to be both proud and satisfied in your work product at the end of cleaning each and every parking stop on your route.

“I’ve also learned that this job can be incredibly difficult and remain impressed that my father had three kids, held a full-time job as a stockbroker and also cleaned parking lots. Yet, he was such a good time manager that we kids didn’t ever feel slighted or think that he didn’t care about us. How he was able to balance his work and family so that both were successful is something that impresses me to this day.”

LOUISVILLE PAVEMENT SWEEP

When Jimmy graduated from college he didn’t plan to either start a sweeping company or go back to work for his dad. However, he got his diploma during the recession and, when he couldn’t find a job, Jim suggested that his son start his own sweeping company. Jimmy felt that if his dad had that much confidence in him then he was willing to go for it. Although Jimmy doesn’t have children, he and his wife — both of whom were from Lexington — moved across the state to Louisville and started Louisville Pavement Sweep.

“I have two main motivations in making this venture a success,” said Jimmy. “One is that I want to justify my wife’s faith in me such that she was willing to move to an entirely new city for us to start this company. Along with that, I want to justify my dad’s confidence in me.”

There are certain advantages to having your father be experienced in the type of business you are starting. One is the ability to get advice day or night. Another, for someone just starting out, is that if your sweeper breaks down it’s possible to get a loaner sweeper from dad’s company.

Jimmy has taken pains to instill in his five employees some of the lessons he learned from his father while working for him. “I didn’t like being out until three or four in the morning working,” said Jimmy, “because I couldn’t be out with my friends. The result of this type of thinking was that the quality of my work product went down. That’s when my dad stepped in and gave me a talk.

“He said that if I was going to be out there working I’d just as well do a great job and end up with the work product I could be proud of. It was like a light bulb went off in my head. Since then, that’s the kind of quality I’ve



wanted to be known for and something I've carried over to the quality I teach to my employees to provide at Louisville Pavement Sweep.

"I've heard many people say they went to work and at the end of the day they didn't even know what they'd gotten done. By contrast, we go to work and completely change the way the parking lot looks. No matter how trashy it might be when we arrive, when we leave it's looking its absolute best. When that's the case, how can one not look at the results with pride and satisfaction?"

"The fact is that property managers often don't know how dirty their own parking lot is," chimed in Jim. "During the day, much of the trash is obscured by parked cars. Once those cars leave they may reveal a huge mess left behind. No matter how bad a property may look when we arrive, what the employees in our organization have been trained to do is to make it spotless before they leave. That commitment to doing the job right is something you have to transmit to your employees, both by example and by training.

"In addition, they need to be taught that it doesn't matter if you get a breakdown of some piece of equipment in the middle of the night. If the backpack blower breaks, that doesn't mean you get to sit in the truck all night because you can't blow off the sidewalks.



Instead, it means you get out there with a bucket and handpick every cigarette butt that's been left behind. I tell them that we can get the backpack blower fixed for you and you'll have it on your route tomorrow, but it's supremely important there is no dip in service on the night it — or whatever else — breaks. Our customer expects us to do a great job each and every night. That's what they expect and that's what we do.

"When a customer writes their check for common area maintenance, in the back of their head their wondering if it's really worth what they're paying. That's when they'll remember if they've seen material left on the lot, or if they've received a complaint from one or more of their tenants. Our goal is to have there be zero problems for them to recall."

Jimmy started off with a single sweeper that he operated himself. "I ran into some trouble getting my first client," Jimmy now recalls, "but I was

confident that if I could just get someone to give me a try they'd be pleased with my work product. Then, I could use that happy client and good looking property to get more accounts.”

That's exactly what occurred and, though it's less than two years old the business has really taken off, primarily through word-of-mouth advertising from one customer to another.

“I believe it's actually easier to do a great job as a smaller company because a hands-on owner can transmit the requirements of the job and employees will adopt them. One thing I've had to learn, though, is how to assess job applicants in terms of if they will become good employees. Because my father has been in business for over 25 years I sort of took it for granted that he had assembled a group of people that take pride in their work. Now that I've had to hire my own employees and train them (the company now has three sweepers and five employees) I've seen firsthand how difficult that is to do. I do finally feel good on that topic today and give a lot of credit to the advice my dad has given me.

“Something else that I feel has given me an advantage is that I've been both an employee and an employer in a sweeping company. I was an employee with my dad's company and now the employer in mine. That gives me a unique perspective on where an employee might leave debris if they're having a bad night and I'm better able to predict what might occur with my employees. That helps me to make sure we keep doing a quality job every night, as well.”

Jimmy has found that prospects for his services respond positively when he tells them that he is a hands-on owner who drives a sweeper, as well as does the accounting and whatever else needs to be done. Of course it is a plus that he has five or six years of experience on top of the year-and-a-half he's been running his own business.

“We have grown, in large part, because I am able to tell skeptical prospects to go look at the parking lots we sweep. Our work speaks for itself. Many have told me they didn't realize how clean their parking lot could be. I think that's an advantage we have over some of the larger companies: over time, I'm sure it's easy to become complacent. At first it's the owner calling the shots and training the employees. Later on, the owner might be playing golf and a manager is the one doing quality control. It's easy to see how a manager's oversight might not reflect an owner's original intent, training and ethics.

We have to remember that right now there is somebody working in their parents' garage developing something that will make our company obsolete.

“That’s something I’m determined to not let happen, just as my dad has not let it happen in his company. I remember a quote from the founder of a very large company; I think it was Google. They said something on the order of ‘We have to remember that right now there is somebody working in their parents’ garage developing something that will make our company obsolete.’ I figure if that’s something that could happen to billion-dollar company, it could certainly happen to mine.”

In the audio interview that accompanies the article, Jim Blackerby discusses the importance of keeping costs down, as well as in bidding a job correctly such that you can afford to clean it to their exacting requirements. For example, his company employs the Gas Buddy app on his smartphone to find the least expensive fuel in the area.

“We have four Speedway gas stations about equidistant from our shop,” said Jim. “Although they are a low-price leader in our area when it comes to name brand fuel, at times I have found a difference of as much as \$.15 a gallon in the pricing from one store to another. So, we check around for the current low price and fuel at that station.



“We also track our other expenses as well as evaluate properties prior taking them on as a client. You never know what kind of shape a prospective new account will be in until you perform a site inspection. It’s amazing what people will dump at a commercial property and sometimes you need to charge for an initial cleanup before taking a customer on for scheduled sweeping. We’re glad

to do large item removal at any time but we can’t afford to just include that with our normal scheduled pricing.”

To better track expenses, as well as where its equipment goes, Lexington Pavement Sweep employs GPS on all of its sweepers. What prompted the move initially was that one of his sweepers was stolen while on the job. Jim said he got a call one night from his sweeper operator, who said he was blowing off the sidewalks with the backpack blower when his sweeper drove by him. The sweeper was found three days later at the bottom of a ravine.

“Once we got the GPS we didn’t know how we had gotten along without it,” said Jim. “There are huge benefits in being able to see where every truck is at any moment, as well as being able to look at the history of where they have been on any given night. By looking, we can see if our operators are taking the most direct route between jobs, stopping off at their girlfriend’s house, or going out of their area entirely.



“These types of things haven’t happened often, I’m glad to say, but there have been several instances where it was clear that our operators didn’t really understand the capabilities of the GPS to track what they were doing. Plus, the system is great when a customer calls wondering if we swept last Wednesday, for example, and at what time. That we can tell them exactly is naturally confidence-inspiring to our property managers.”

“Yes,” agreed Jimmy, “we have GPS on our sweepers for exactly the same reasons. GPS is, indeed, great for making sure employees are doing their jobs correctly. For example, as my dad has taught me, if I know it takes a minimum of 45 minutes to handle a particular account correctly but check and see my operator left after 25 minutes, I can immediately call him to discuss the situation. More often, though, I think of the GPS as a way to confirm, to any customers who might have questions, exactly when our operator was there, how long he was onsite, etc. Used correctly, GPS is confidence-instilling all around.”

In addition to sweeping, Jim’s company has a crew of eight snowplow operators. He finds that to be perhaps the most complementary of tasks for a sweeping company in a snowbelt state. “There’s nobody that knows the parking lots we sweep as well as we do,” said Jim. “It doesn’t matter when you get just an inch or two of snow, but this year, for example, we had one snowfall that was 15 inches and another that was 23 inches.



“At that point, unless you know what the parking lot configuration is when there isn’t any snow on it, it is very easy to damage both the parking lot and your snowplow. This year we saw extensive damage on a number of the parking lots where we sweep but do not do the plowing. This included torn up landscaping, parking bumpers and just about anything else that might be on a parking lot. Although we

typically buy salt in bulk, this year we also stockpiled a large amount in bags so we could continue to serve our customers through what was one of the worst winters on record.”

Although his company also does some mowing and pressure washing for customers, to date that is where they have drawn the line. They do keep a roster of companies that do other services, like line striping or seal coating, so they can recommend contractors for clients to contact. Jim feels that by trying to do too many services, and cross train employees into too many areas, it’s easier to lose sight of doing a great job in the core business.

When asked what his largest surprise was in running his own operation, Jimmy’s response was that it was to learn to be adaptable. “The way my personality is,” Jimmy said, “is that I wanted to plan for every contingency and have everything worked out so that all would progress exactly the way I had planned. As time has gone on I have realized that I can’t plan for everything that might go wrong. I’ve learned it’s better if you’re ready to adapt to whatever might happen and handle it from that point. I’m sure this realization has help me reduce my blood pressure.”

After more than five years of conducting monthly Featured Contractor interviews, this was one of my personal favorites. Jim started in the sweeping business at about the same time that I started working with contractors through writing and advising in the power sweeping industry. I found it quite satisfying to hear first-hand how a second-generation owner is progressing so successfully.

The contract sweeping business has become increasingly difficult through those years, especially in the last decade. It's great to see that the training of someone with experience can contribute to the success of his son's startup company in today's tough marketplace. Using the springboard of his training while working for his dad's company, combined with having his dad as an ongoing mentor, Jimmy has been able to grow to become a three-sweeper operation in under two years in business. That's certainly one measure of how well Louisville Pavement Sweep is keeping its customers satisfied.



Lexington Pavement Sweep's shop area.

Jim Blackerby's story is an inspiring one of how running a company with a mandate of hard work and high ideals has brought the owner success. Even more inspiring, to me, was the story of how those ideals have been passed along to his son, Jimmy, who seems slated to become one of the next generation of leaders in the power sweeping industry.

You may reach Jim Blackerby, Jr. via the company's website, which is www.LexingtonPavementSweep.com. Jim Blackerby III may be contacted through his website at www.LouisvillePavementSweep.com.