

TRUCK NEWS

Seaway Express: In the hands of a daughter

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by Sonia Straface

There is no shortage of father and son stories when we talk about trucking. You know the story – Dad stumbles into trucking looking for work way back when, loves the open road and being able to be behind the wheel of a big rig, Son follows in Dad's footsteps and chooses trucking as his career – but that's not how the story of Seaway Express, a fleet based out of Cornwall, Ont. goes.

Back in May 1990, Bob Gauthier, an experienced dispatcher, and his wife Linda started Seaway Express with just a five-ton truck and their home office. Their goal was to provide overnight transport between Eastern Ontario and Quebec, a corridor they believed wasn't covered as well as it should be. Today, the business – which just celebrated its 25th anniversary – is flourishing and is in the very capable hands of Gauthier's daughter, Melanie Hamel.



Melanie Hamel (left) with her parents Bob and Linda Gauthier

To date, the company boasts 25 trucks, 55 employees, 60 trailers and a truckload of awards to boot.

It has been named Business of the Year by Cornwall's Chamber of Commerce twice, has won the Award of Excellence in Entrepreneurship by the Ontario Trucking Association, and in 1999, the company was dubbed an "Excellent" rated carrier by the MTO. This rating, according to the company, has remained unchanged to this date.

The company hauls mostly general freight or as Hamel puts it, "anything that goes into a Wal-Mart store."

Hamel is currently Seaway's general manager, and while her parents are still very much involved in the family business, she seems to be running the show.

She admits that though trucking wasn't her first career option (she went to journalism school, initially) it was always in the back of her mind because of the family business.

"My start in trucking started when I was a kid," she said. "It's a family company so my siblings and I have all worked here at some point. We would always have conversations about work and trucking around the dinner table, so it was always there."

And though her career at Seaway started in between university semesters in the summer, she now handles everything from marketing to human resources to safety at Seaway.

"I do a little bit of everything, really," she said.

The company's success, according to Hamel is two-fold: its unique location and its people.

"I think we've been so successful because we're very good in the area that we cover," she said. "We're the triangle of Cornwall, Ottawa and Montreal. We've always stayed within that area, so we've learned how to do a great job within that small niche market. And I also think that customer service is the number one reason why we've been doing so well. We have great people, great staff, great drivers and because of all the team work involved, we're able to succeed in the area that we cover."

Hamel added that her father credits the company's success to some key customers that joined his venture back in 1990.

“When the company first started, there were a few key customers that (my dad) credits to building the success of Seaway,” she said. “The customers took a chance with him, and took him on as their carrier and as a result, it led to buying a bigger truck, and from there (my parents) were able to buy a 53-ft. trailer and grow the business – by first renting out a warehouse, then eventually buying a warehouse.”

Though Seaway is doing incredibly well, it isn't immune to the same problems that seem to be strangling the industry.

Hamel said the changing economy is a concern for her business, as well as the trend of companies growing their distribution centres.

“Having less raw materials to move is certainly a concern,” she said. “Another concern is larger box stores controlling their transportation with their own private fleets. This makes it difficult to us to compete.”

One trend that isn't affecting Seaway is the driver shortage, partly because of the nature of company, which doesn't do any long-haul work.

“I know finding qualified drivers is certainly a trend in the industry, but we're pretty lucky,” Hamel said. “We've got great drivers and once they get on board, they stay, so our turnover is quite low because drivers are able to be home for supper. We don't do any long-haul so they're able to be home.”

Hamel added that the company's approach to its drivers is a definite reason as to why they aren't going anywhere.

“We think that as long as we treat the employees right, they'll stay and that's what we noticed,” she said. “And so even though we know there is a difficulty to find qualified drivers, we've been lucky to have a great team and they've stuck around. It's a great environment here, and I think everyone is really respectful. I think everybody enjoys what they're doing. I think just our overall culture at the company is to be as efficient and customer-driven and I think everyone here, from our dispatchers to our drivers get that. Everyone works hard to represent Seaway as best as they can.”

Seaway celebrated its 25th anniversary in June with a customer appreciation BBQ where local dignitaries and customers were invited to toast the staff for their hard work over the years.

“Some of the very first customers and employees and people who took a chance on Seaway were invited to the BBQ,” said Hamel. “And it was a great success, we had a great turn out. It was a great way to celebrate our 25th and later in the afternoon we held an employee appreciation BBQ so all the staff and their families came.”

As for the next 25 years, Hamel is certain that the future of Seaway and the future of trucking is a bright one.

“I think transportation will always be needed,” she said.

“I think at the end of the day everything needs to be transported to a final destination, so I don’t think the future of trucking is dismal in any way. I’m optimistic that trucking will be needed for a very long time.”