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Volume 34 • Issue 1 • January 2009

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Management Services Northwest cleans up
Owner Janelle Bruland reveals how it's been named one of 2008's fastest-growing companies – twice



Janelle Bruland, center, has grown Management Services Northwest from 10 employees to more than 180, a handful of whom are pictured here at the Ferndale headquarters.

By Amanda Baltazar

A janitorial business may not sound glamorous, but it led to Management Services Northwest being named No. 1,682 on the Inc. 500, a list of the country's fastest-growing companies.

In the same month as it received this honor, it was ranked number 48 out of 100 companies in the Puget Sound Business Journal's list of the top 100 fastest-growing companies in Washington state – and was the only Whatcom County firm to make the list.

The Ferndale-based company's growth largely comes down to the successful management of its owner, Janelle Bruland, who acquired it in 1995.

"I purchased it as an investment, something to do on the side," said Bruland, who pointed out that it was a small, family owned company with 10 employees when she took over.

And now the company has 181 employees, and just entered its second state, Oregon. Although there's just one client there so far, Bruland does plan to soon have more business in Oregon, as well as in Idaho.

She didn't have grandiose plans for the company in the beginning. At the time she



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was doing some management consulting, but her main role was being a single mom for her daughters, who are now aged 22 and 13 (and have been joined by a third sister, age 10).

To her surprise, the company took off and business grew.

Management Services Northwest began under Bruland by offering cleaning services to local businesses such as Diehl Ford (a client since 1995), People's Bank (since 1997) and Parkway Dental Center (since 1995) and has continued to add services as the company has grown and customer needs have emerged. "We see ourselves as an extension of their business," Bruland said.

One way Bruland looks after her customers is by having her employees strategically placed throughout Washington (and now Oregon), "so if we have a client in a specific area, we can hire staff who live there so there's the local presence and a quick response," she said.

"We feel that it is very important to have a local presence for our clients. Not only does the client get to see us face to face on a regular basis, but from a repair or emergency standpoint, we can then respond to any facility need within an hour," Bruland added.

The company now has two different divisions: janitorial services (the cleaning business) and total facilities (everything else, from landscaping to all types of repair and maintenance).

"We work from the roof to the parking lot," said Bruland. Many clients, she said, rely on her company to make recommendations for a building and then do the work.

The company's cleaning business is all contract work, and for most of these clients, Management Services Northwest cleans on a daily basis, usually three to five days a week, sometimes every day. The company also does some project work in construction clean-up services.

Over the years, most of the business' growth has been simply through word of mouth, said Bruland, and even in these difficult economic times it's a great business to be in "because there's always going to be a need for maintenance. If you have backed up your sink or your toilet needs to be fixed, [it] can't be left. And we're a one-call fix."

Focus on the customer

Bruland's outlook for the coming year remains positive yet cautious.

"These are tough times for many, but our outlook here at Management Services Northwest is that we will take this challenging economic time as an opportunity to be an even better support and partner to our clients," she explained.

To others who are worried, she recommends getting back to the basics of what has made them successful and being extremely focused on building those core business areas.

However, never one to be complacent, Bruland said that her clients are, of course, looking at what they spend during the recession. "So I think we need to be moldable and adapt with our clients."

It's this kind of open attitude that's helped get Bruland to where she is today.

It's about having a vision and really listening to, and understanding, the customers, she said. "We take care of their buildings as if they're our own, and we really listen to our customers."

And, she added, she and her employees talk to their clients and ask questions. "So often we assume what our customers' needs and expectations are. The better we understand our customers' needs the better we will serve them."

Taking care of it

It's not just her customers that Bruland takes care of; she also looks after her employees.

In fact, Bruland attributes a lot of her success to her employees and even thinks that one of her talents is sensing the strengths in people.

"It's very important that I continue to surround myself with passionate individuals

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who can help me through these economic changes,” she said. “My main goal is supporting the team members we have in place. I have some really loyal, dedicated people who take ownership of the work.”

Despite being surrounded by a great team, Bruland said that hiring and retaining quality people is one of the biggest challenges in business.

“We have strived to improve our record through developing a detailed hiring process, and also hiring people that we believe are the best fit to our company principles and values. One of the best compliments I have ever received was when one of my clients sent a thank you note saying ‘Your people exemplify your mission statement of ‘We’ll take care of it!’”

“We’ll take care of it” has two meanings, said Bruland – her employees take care of each other as well as their customers. “Those two simple things are why we’re successful,” she added.

“We have a culture of caring for each other first and then our clients. I want to create a positive, caring environment that’s like a family and where people like to come to work. I try to bring a balance of working hard while we’re here but then everyone goes home and spends quality time with their family.”

And that’s exactly what Bruland herself does. Bruland’s eldest daughter, Terell, is now part of the business, and has been since she graduated from Gonzaga University in Spokane with a degree in sales and business in 2007.

“She grew up in the business and has done everything from cleaning buildings to answering the phones,” said Bruland, “but I never thought she’d have any interest in working in the business with me.” As for her other daughters working for her, she said, “It’s an open door, but I want them to follow their hearts.”

Keeping the balance between work and family is difficult, Bruland admitted. “It can be particularly challenging as the work grows and gets very exciting.” It’s important to remember what your purpose is and why you’re doing your job in the first place, she added.

Continued growth

The one thing Bruland doesn’t do is rest on her laurels, but explained that’s a mistake many companies make. “You have to be open and flexible to change.”

It’s also important to have a growth plan, she pointed out.

“Know what you are best at, and have a disciplined process for evaluating each opportunity that comes along. We have always taken a conservative approach to our financial decisions, and kept a close working relationship with our bankers and financial advisers.”

And true to her own advice, Bruland plans to continue to grow her business through 2009 and meet head on any economic difficulties it throws her way.

As for goals in 2009, Bruland wants to continue to hire more people and to expand her business through Washington, Oregon and Idaho, and perhaps even beyond.

“Next year is a big question mark,” she said. “We may slow things down a little but we’ll move forward. We’ll look at how we can work with our customers. We look at our work as a partnership with our clients.”

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