



Lapels Dry Cleaning brings a new future to an old business

By Alex Johnson

Dry cleaning is by no means a new industry – the modern process has been around since the 19th century, and for good reason. As long as people care what they look like, there will always be a demand for dry cleaning services. It's the reason it is considered a stable and recession-proof business.

However, Hanover-based Lapels Dry Cleaning has been changing up the formula. If you're thinking of a traditional mom-and-pop dry cleaning shop, you may not recognize this new face of dry cleaning. The company proudly presents itself as "The Future of Dry Cleaning" in its brand and backs up the claim with an active commitment to innovation in the industry.

But dry cleaning is only half the story as Lapels is an award-winning franchise with over 50 locations. Michael Eisner, Director of Sales and Real Estate for Lapels, provides some insight as to how this has happened. As Lapels' first franchisee, Eisner has the full perspective when it comes to growing the company on store location and corporate levels.

"I had spent many years in technology working for a large audio manufacturer here, headquartered in Massachusetts and did an extensive amount of traveling in my position," recounts Eisner. "It was in trying to find a business of my own where I could lay my head on my own pillow [that I] came across dry cleaning."

Why dry cleaning? "When I looked at businesses, dry cleaning was the most stable, recession-resistant small business out there, had been around for 150 years, and I knew it wasn't going to go anywhere," says Eisner. The odds are not stacked in a new business' favor, with roughly half closing their doors within the first four years of operation. Eisner saw something different in dry cleaning.

"It's not a fad. Having a business is not a fad, [but] that's really a lot of what you see today in small business, things are here today but gone tomorrow." Eisner liked what he saw with the



Michael Eisner, Director of Sales and Real Estate for Lapels Dry Cleaning

stability and staying power already present in the dry cleaning industry, but he saw potential that wasn't being met. "[Dry cleaning] was one of the last industries [that was] dominated by more mom-and-pop-type businesses that were entrenched in the dry cleaning process." Instead of working on the business, Eisner says, these people were working in the business. "I felt there was a great opportunity here to really get involved with a company that focused on professionalism, best practices, marketing and customer service."

From the ground up

Eisner found what he was looking for in Lapels when he became its first franchisee in 2001. The company had been started just the year before. "Lapels was started by three gentlemen who all had been involved with the dry cleaning industry, shared their best practices, and we came up with a model based on those three founders for how we were going to grow this industry and service our customers."

The hands-on relationship that Lapels maintains with its franchisees started there. "I was the first franchisee, but I certainly was instrumental in assisting the corporate office in developing best practices [at] the store level ... so it became a natural progression for me to then move into an area developer role." When a franchisee approached Eisner to purchase his franchise, his next move was clear. "We were able to get that transaction completed and I just moved right up to the corporate office – into the position of helping others with their business because I was

already accustomed to doing that within the store level as a Lapels corporate trainer."

The franchisee relationship

It's been 14 years since Lapels started and it now has 32 franchisees, 52 operating locations, 14 stores in development, locations in 14 states from Massachusetts to California, and signed franchise agreements in Mississippi and Florida. Despite the broader purview, Lapels continues to cultivate relationships with every franchisee, and that starts with training.

"Training is certainly key to our success with our franchisees. They spend several weeks working with the corporate office with our trainers, a training facility for one week, and then we bring our plant trainer to their facility to train them for a week," Eisner explains.

But the training doesn't end there. "We will connect [each] franchisee with a mentoring program where they'll be working with one of our existing franchisees to learn more as we move about building our business. One thing that we always are doing is staying in contact and communicating with our franchisees on a daily or weekly basis."

The future of dry cleaning


Lapels is determined to bring their franchisees into the future as the company strives to be an industry leader. "We've created great tools to do that," Eisner says. Webinars are offered to franchisees regularly and provide professional development training. "Over the past several weeks we've had webinars on these new and

innovative ways we're now approaching marketing and it's really exciting, it's an exciting time here at the corporate office and our franchisees are really responding to it extremely well." Lapels provides its franchisees with social media dashboards, allowing them to manage their online presences easily. "The key," says Eisner, "is sending out a brand message and a consistent message to your customers and engaging [them] on a weekly basis."

This kind of progress, says Eisner, is more important to Lapels than explosive growth. "We're looking at a slow and steady build and having successful franchisees. Through the success of our franchisees we're going to get to where we need to be when we reach our hundredth store, but right now the goal is to have franchisees who are successful, happy and have stability. That's our goal right now. In the meantime, we will continue to open up stores as they come about." And they have been coming about – Lapels has opened 12 locations to date in 2014. "This has been a very good year for us," adds Eisner.

This sense of responsibility extends beyond the franchisee, as Lapels takes environmentally friendly practices seriously. "That term is used quite often by many dry cleaners, but truly being environmentally friendly consists of more than just recycling hangars ... for us, it's using LED lighting and finding ways to save on utilities," says Eisner. Alternative solvents, created by manufacturers such as Green Earth, are better for the environment.

Lapels' innovative approach to dry cleaning has won them accolades as well. "Recently we were named by Entrepreneur Magazine as an Innovator," Eisner says. The recognition was based on Lapels recreating and improving upon the hub-and-spokes model, a scalable model wherein each plant location, or hub, supports about five satellite stores.

It's been an effective model for Lapels, and one that Eisner is keen to give credit for, in the Lapels spirit of cooperation: Kevin Dubois, CEO of Lapels, was the company's vice president before buying the company out from one of the founders. "Since he's been involved here at Lapels, we've had tremendous growth and a lot of positive changes have taken place with the positioning of our brand. That really has happened over the past three years since he's been the man in charge." 



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BIZNOTE

South Shore's new hospice residence opens

The first patients of the area's new Hospice Residence in Hingham were welcomed last month by Norwell VNA and Hospice. Located on Turkey Hill adjacent to the Weir River Farm, the hospice residence is now open and available for individuals who are hospice-eligible. Typically, people who are currently under hospice care at home or whose doctor has referred them to hospice come to live at a hospice residence if they can no longer remain at home. To date, no such residence has existed for South Shore residents; of the nine hospice homes in the state, the closest are in Needham and on Cape Cod. The hospice residence includes 12 private rooms, each with its own bathroom, a complement of common living spaces, and a chapel. A large family area and kitchen offers residents and their families and friends a home-like setting in which to gather and enjoy visits. The surrounding grounds include gardens and trails to the neighboring Weir Reservation.