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Petty Differences

Aqua Systems founder Lou Petty defines longevity as his business turns 50

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p11

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Petty

Differences

Aqua Systems founder Lou Petty defines longevity as his business turns 50

By Mike Beas

Hendricks County Business Leader

Saturdays are special to Lou Petty. They don't have to be, but they are. As someone who retired a dozen years ago, leaving the business he founded in the hands of a generation different from his, the 73-year-old could be at home relaxing or attempting to lower his golf handicap of 22.

Instead, Petty most Saturdays can be found from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the offices of Aqua Systems in Avon. Shooting the breeze and pressing flesh are primary components of the job description as Petty hobnobs with longtime customers and warmly greets potential new clients. He is the face of Aqua Systems, a man grateful to have seen virtually everything in his industry, but anxious to see more.

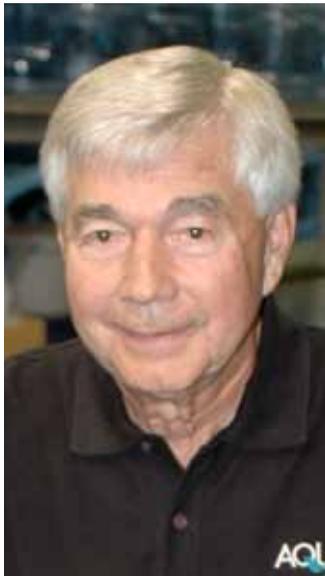
"(Lou) is the reason we're here. We've got people who start working here and never leave," says Mike Bowling, who has been with Aqua Systems since 1990 and is now its Certified Specialist and Retail Director. "Lou is the same guy. He's genuine. He's true. His influence is still there across the board."

This Labor Day Weekend (Sept. 5-7) qualifies as landmark on a couple of levels for Petty, most-impressive being that it marks 50 years in the water business. Secondly, it's the 20-year anniversary of Aqua Systems moving business operations from the southeast corner of the square in Danville, its home from 1964-89, to its present address of 7785 E US Hwy 36 in Avon.

The Avon of two decades ago and Avon today share a common ground in name only. When Aqua Systems elected to move east, its neighbors were, laughs Petty, "pigs, cows and deer." Farmland dominated the then-underdeveloped eastern half of Hendricks County. Unlike the majority of businesses that in time broke ground, however, Aqua Systems had a three-decade head start in terms of name recognition.

Petty it turns out had another built-in ace in the hole in son, Bret. The second of his three children with wife, Wanda, Bret Petty was, as his old man puts it, "born into the business and hated it. He used to tell me that after college he was going to get in his Fiat and head west." While attending Indiana University, Bret became involved in a program on entrepreneurialism and used Aqua Systems as a case study. In time he began restructuring the business from afar.

"He overhauled it completely while he was in college. I've got to be honest, I was nervous," admits Lou, who says between



"Our customer base is so happy that they are our sales force."

- Lou Petty

1980-82 was when Bret's teachings truly went into effect. "You cannot build a business as long as you oversell the business. (Bret) said, 'we need to eliminate direct sales and sales commissions.' It's the way the franchise was designed, but we shifted gears and that's when our concept was born. Why not do an honest presentation and show people how to shop and compare."

Now 50, Bret Petty lives in Avon. His insights and business savvy are among the primary reasons Aqua Systems remains, and historically has remained, ahead of the business curve. At the same time, Bret is the kind of person who will downplay his significance within the company.

"It embarrasses him to take the credit for this, but he deserves all of it," beams Lou. "I can't tell you how proud I am of him. And to think when he was young I just hoped and prayed I would get him out of (Avon) high school."

Told of the compliment from his father, Bret laughs. "I guess I'm paying them all off pretty good," he says. "In my mind the great story is I recognize the opportunity of being the son of a guy who went out on his own. We just happen to be lucky that my dad and I have different skillsets that pair up well. My dad knows everybody. He's everybody's friend. I'm the background person and I'm extremely fine with that. I would put things together and he would talk about the product."

Talking about the product. Where does Lou Petty begin? Aqua Systems has evolved into a multi-pronged force in the water industry, specializing in everything from filtration to water softening to coolers and dispensers to bottled water. According to Bowling, Aqua Systems advertises in print publications approximately half the year during the warm-weather months, yet word-of-mouth remains a potent promotional mechanism.

"I am so proud of this company and the people who work here. In this economy, we're still doing great and that says a lot about the people," says Lou. "Our customer base is so happy that they are our sales force. And, no, they're not on the payroll. If they see a competitor's car in a neighbor's driveway, they call that person and say, 'Don't do it.'"

Want to hear more? Stop by Aqua Systems some Saturday morning. Lou Petty will be more than happy to oblige.

Above right: Lou Petty at his desk and hard at work in 1965. **Top:** Working the tanks in this 1965 photograph are, L-R, Earl Gosset, Carl Cummins and Mark Green.



Old photos submitted

AQUA SYSTEMS

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How Lou did it

BEST ADVICE YOU EVER RECEIVED: It boils down to be true to yourself. I am a happy person because of that.

BEST BUSINESS DECISION: To go into business for myself. It's important to me to give customers what they want and then some. Another great decision was marrying my beautiful wife, my high school sweetheart. That's how I started having these wonderful kids.

WORST BUSINESS DECISION: Believing that the business I'm in is a direct-sales and commission-driven business.

IN FIVE YEARS I WANT ... To be healthy enough to enjoy my four grandchildren. I enjoy all of them. They're different and they're special and I'm honored to be part of their world.

MY SECRET TO SUCCESS: My mother taught it to me as a child and that's the Golden Rule. Treat people as you would want to be treated. In business, give people what they expect and then some. It's all simple stuff.



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