

FabricareCanada

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2013 Buyer's Guide

Dave Barker

Canadian Industry Person
of the Year





Canadian INDUSTRY PERSON of the Year

Dave Barker arrived in Calgary at the age of 18 to learn how to train horses. Two years into this training, his instructors parted company and Dave was out of a career. Having fallen in love with the blue skies of Alberta, he didn't want to return to his hometown of Williams Lake, BC with its cloudy winters, so he took a job in a grocery store.

A friend, who was working in dry cleaning, urged him to apply for an opening as a cleaner-spotter at One Hour Martinizing. To please his friend, and with no experience, Dave applied for the job and got it. He was trained for

three months by an older employee, and then came his big break.

A manager who had been hired to open a new plant quit the job. Dave was put into the position temporarily at the age of 20. He found himself heading a staff of veteran workers, averaging 25 years' experience. Obviously his bosses, Jack Stephen and Lloyd Gillette, recognized Dave's leadership abilities and soon made him the supervisor of four locations. Later, Dave teamed with an

investor to buy two One Hour Martinizing stores, and later bought his partner out and opened a third Martinizing store.

EARLY INNOVATIONS

At this time (mid 1970s) he introduced two new ideas. One was guaranteed dry cleaning. This was at the time when silk was returning to the market and many plants posted signs saying they were not responsible for cleaning silk garments. What's more, many plants refused to accept silks. Dave cleaned them all, and guaranteed his cleaning. From this time forward he has always fully guaranteed his work and claims have never risen above one half of one percent per year.

The second big idea was to cultivate the local bridal shops, each of which he visited, describing his guaranteed clean-

ing and preservation service, and leaving brochures that gave brides a \$35 discount on their gowns. In addition, when a discount coupon was presented at the plant, the bridal shop received a \$35 credit towards the cleaning and repairing its stock of gowns.

By this time Dave realized the constrictions of the One Hour Martinizing franchises were preventing him from becoming the leading edge dry cleaner he wanted to be. So he broke away from OHM and renamed his operation Barker's Fine Drycleaning.

SEEKING THE EXPERTS

He then researched the industry to find and join those he felt were on the leading edge. He was an original member of The Golomb Group, an original member of the Association of Wedding Gown Specialists (buying two franchises to sew up the Alberta market), an original member of the Tuchman Group, and was one of the original members of the Route Pro organization. Most recently, he joined Methods for Management and has already been singled out for his innovative promotions. Thus he tapped into the most advanced ideas in the industry and then adapted and improved on them for his company. He also joined the Alberta Textile Care Association and the International Drycleaners Congress.

How successful was he? Here's one statistic: Barker's Fine Drycleaning processed over 1,000 wedding gowns a year, and in the busiest season he had as many as 100 gowns in his marquee store at a time. This location had a beautifully decorated Bridal Room off the main lobby, for consultations and fittings.

NEW BEGINNING

At the turn of the century Dave sold his successful operation, keeping only one lease outstanding on a not-yet-built building in Cochrane, AB. In 2002 he opened Drycleaning by Dave, Coutour Cleaner for Exceptional Fabricare, in Cochrane. In 2005, daughter Candice joined the organization and was made manager of the Cochrane plant.

This enabled him to purchase a second plant in Canmore and open a satellite store in Calgary. Son-in-law Jeff Mills shares management duties with Candice as well as supervising the route operation. Today the business includes two plants, two satellite stores, two routes and a staff of 22 full- and part-time employees. Several of Barker's Fine Drycleaning staff eventually joined Drycleaning by Dave. The organization has seen double digit growth every year since the first store was opened.

LATEST INNOVATIONS

Dave continues to fine-tune his operation to expand his customer base and provide new services. He now includes free pickup and delivery for wedding gown service. Son-in-law Jeff makes the pickup and spends as much time as necessary with the bridal family, examining the dress and describing the service. This has eliminated a major bottleneck in the company's former service, with customers filling the store as they examined (in minute detail) dresses ready for boxing. Interestingly enough, pickup and delivery eliminates the store visit.

Then there is the newest service for which Dave is now nationally known, thanks to the internet: Texas Press™ starched

jeans. As a former cowboy, Dave's heart is really in this service, which nets him \$13 per pair, with 40 pairs processed a day, rising to 60 to 100 pairs daily during the Calgary Stampede. In fact, he has a truck at the event from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. every day to pick up work. This is processed overnight and returned the following morning. In addition, he sponsors some of the top riders in the Stampede.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

The individual who nominated Dave for Industry Person of the Year specifically mentioned his concern for the environment. This statement on the company's website says it all. "Processes meet or exceed clean air and water standards. Being a responsible dry cleaner is part of our promise to world-class excellence." The operation cleans in perc – responsibly.

CUSTOMER CONTACT

Dealing with people has always been one of Dave's strongest talents. His respect and care for employees and customers has been a mainstay in building his businesses. His natural concern for customers is aided by computers. All customers who have not been in the store for 30 days receive a phone call inviting them to return. Another call is made at 60 days, and at 90 days' absence the person is informed that he or she has a \$25 credit at Drycleaning by Dave. Does it work? Over 50% return.

FAMILY BACKUP

Dave has the interesting situation of having both a wife and a sister with the same name. To outsiders they are always referred to as wife Sharon and sister Sharon. Wife Sharon has

always been fully supportive of Dave's decisions in the business and backs him 100% with her own insights and suggestions.

In addition to Candice, who is now general manager of the operation, and who presides over a website you have to see to believe, wife Sharon and Dave have a son, Cody. After working for several years in the family business, Cody left to become a journeyman electrician.

With solid family backing Dave is now able to pull back from the day-to-day operation and do what he enjoys most: processing problem garments two days a week. He looks forward to using the skills taught him long ago and augmented by his years of experience.

A new location is in his sights in Calgary. He does not need to go outside the organization to find a manager. All Drycleaning by Dave employees are cross-trained and given the opportunity for management duties in the plants, when appropriate.

Sister Sharon worked in Barker's Fine Drycleaning for many years before marrying videographer Fran Munoz and becoming a professional photographer. She took the pictures for this article, and gets the last word about her big brother. "He's my hero!" ■

