



by Ranger Kidwell-Ross

It's quite a stretch from being a wholesale mortgage broker in Nevada to running a sweeping contracting business in Oregon, but that's how Eddie Hamilton got his start in the industry.

Soon after having surgery for skin cancer he got a call asking him to come to Oregon to 'package up' a business so it could be sold. Knowing nothing about sweeping – but figuring that business was business – Hamilton saw the opportunity as something he could do and a way to get out of the mortgage business. Two years later, Hamilton decided to buy the company he'd made a success.

A local couple had actually started Commercial Power Sweeping, Inc. back in 1968. However, starting in about 2000, a series of health misfortunes overtook them. These ultimately led to the death of both principals and their son, leaving the business to their high school student daughter.

Family members initially tried to run the company, but that ended in failure. The trustee for the estate happened to be Hamilton's brother and, knowing Hamilton had a strong business background and was looking for a change of career and location, contacted him to see if he would be willing to try and get the business back on track enough to get it sold.

"I knew nothing about sweeping but said I'd give it my best. When I got to Oregon in 2006 I hid out in a motel for three days waiting for the rain to stop," recalls Hamilton with a laugh. "It didn't.

"When I got there the company had income of about \$5800 a month, which simply wasn't enough to pay a couple of people as well as make some machine payments the company was obligated for. Initially, there were many challenges to overcome.

"One of the first things I had to learn was how to sweep, including how to sweep in the rain. Then, I set out to sell more business so it could become profitable. Fortunately, I had enough sense to contact people in the industry who knew some answers, including WorldSweeper, NAPSA and some other west coast contractors. Everyone was gracious in providing their assistance."

After two years of business building, the company was profitable enough to put up for sale. By this time, Hamilton had learned enough about sweeping that he put



his name in as a potential buyer. Satisfactory purchase arrangements were made in 2008, and Hamilton found himself the owner of the long-standing contract sweeping company.

After the purchase, Hamilton decided to try expanding into a couple of new areas, catch basin cleaning and snow removal.

Another move that proved to be a good one was to join SIMA, the snow and ice association. And, fortunately, snowfall was heavy the year they got going in the snow abatement business.



Hamilton's successful business model is to combine reasonable pricing with what he calls "quality, quality service. We're very receptive to getting back to our customers and taking care of anything they might have a complaint about. We just don't get very many complaints, though, and the quality we provide has brought that about."



Although Commercial lost about 18% of its business when the recession hit – mostly customers who cut back in their frequency of sweeps – they have since recouped that loss and held steady.

Although employee turnover was initially a problem, Hamilton says the last three years have seen no employees leave and he has a dependable, well-trained crew. For sweepers, Commercial Sweeping has three Schwarze S-series units, an Elgin Whirlwind and a Victory T600. This gives them versatility to handle

everything from parking lot sweeping to construction cleanup to homeowners' associations. Since he's now 72, Hamilton says he doesn't really want to expand all that much further.

"I'm in sort of a holding position," said Hamilton. "I don't want to work too much harder than I am now. I have a good foreman and we're doing a great job for our customers. Although our market would let us expand, I don't really have much interest in doing so."

I have learned, though, that the sweeping business is a very good one to be in. Stress is so much less than the mortgage business that you can't even compare the two. And, if you take care of your customers then I think sweeping is a great long-term business."

Hamilton stressed the importance of having a versatile fleet, in order to best serve a wide range of customers. "Our single Schwarze 347 costs less to operate than our two 348s," Hamilton said. "But, we can do more with the 348s so that makes them an important fleet addition. Then, the Whirlwind allows us to take on street cleaning and storm drain cleaning, which has become a good part of



our business. And, the T600 tow-behind does a good job and is very low cost to operate.

"I recommend to anyone just starting out that they grow at a rate that allows them to only have one sweeper being financed at a time. Do keep in mind that you'll need some type of backup unit, though. And keep enough money available so you can keep your machines in good repair. If you can't sweep, you'll have unhappy customers and lose accounts. In the event you can't sweep on schedule, though, it's important to contact your customers to keep them apprised as to what's going on.

"I've also learned how important it is to keep on top of any maintenance issues. For example, if you lose a fan because you didn't keep track of maintenance that's a very expensive mistake. Anticipate repairs and try to get that money put into your budget."

Hamilton recommends taking a close look at each and every account at least every six months, in order to see if they are profitable. "When I got there," said Hamilton, "we had some accounts where the crew was on the job up to four times longer than the breakeven point would allow. The guys on the machines weren't the ones doing the paperwork and usually had no idea about the time that should be budgeted for the account. Getting that all straightened out made a big difference.



"I'm very grateful for the assistance I received initially from WorldSweeper and from contractors I contacted to ask questions," continued Hamilton. "At first I hardly knew the questions to ask, but with the help of others in the industry I was able to learn what I needed to know to make a go of the business. There are a lot of good people in our industry who are willing to provide helpful advice."

In the approximately 25-minute audio interview with Eddie Hamilton, you will hear details about all of the above and more. **Note:** The audio interview with Eddie Hamilton will play without downloading any files onto your computer. If you hear the interview at 'chipmunk speed,' you will need to download the latest version of [Adobe's free Flash player](#).

To play the interview, click [this link](#) or on the small triangle inside the circle you see to the left. If you have any trouble accessing the audio, please [let us know](#).

Eddie Hamilton may be reached via email sent to eddie@commercialsweepinginc.com. You may also reach the company by calling 503.371.8420. The company's website is located at www.commercialsweepinginc.com.

If you have questions or comments about this article and interview, please, [let us know](#) and we can add it in as an addendum to this article.



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