



Pictured (from l to r), front row — Kenny Campbell, Shaun Wilkins, Ben Lawton, Chance Thomas, Salvador Hernandez, and Dayton Hylton; second row — Luke East, Shawn Phillips, Michael Mattson, Will Bullard, Adam Weckesser, and Dale Huff; third row — Jeff Hurst, Brad Scott, Brian George, Sam Walker, Michael Badger, and Thomas Sharp; fourth row — Mary Jo Houser, Anita Calandra, Karen Childress, Julie Anne Beaton, Jess Lively, Christy Bonneville, Melissa Vance, Sheila Hylton, and Lauryl Brisson. (Not pictured: Jacob Goosie, Sarah Raby and Trina Russell.)

TENNESSEE PRIDE

Dayton and Sheila Hylton have grown Dayton's Pest Control by remaking its culture and rethinking the company's growth strategy.

The story of Dayton's Pest Control is relatable to many PCOs. It's the story of a firm that has reinvented itself many times over, and continues to evolve as new employees are added and new strategies mapped out.

Today, the Knoxville, Tenn.-based business is thriving, growing, financially

sound — a far cry from the company that Owner Dayton Hylton founded out of his parents' basement in 1985.

UPS & DOWNS. A native of the Knoxville area, Hylton attended the University of Tennessee from 1972 to 1977, where he was interested in pursuing a veterinary degree, earning a B.S. in animal science. Hylton changed direction to study entomology, a decision

influenced by one of his early mentors, Dr. Stelman Bennett, head of the UT Entomology Department, and father of Hylton's best friend/college roommate. Bennett also had provided Hylton with guidance while he was in high school preparing insect collections for biology class. Hylton began graduate school in entomology as a graduate research assistant and after three years earned an M.S. in entomology.



After graduation, Hylton decided to transition from academia to the business world. He gained industry experience working for a trio of pest control companies in the Knoxville, Tenn., and Durham, N.C., areas, and in 1985 he ventured out on his own, launching Dayton's Pest Control from the basement of his parents' home.

In retrospect, Hylton said, "I didn't have any business experience and that would have helped. I've had to learn how to operate a pest control business as I've gone along."

The challenge early on was, of course, getting customers. "I pretty much went door to door in my parents' neighborhood. Then I started bidding on projects." The first, and biggest, bid he won was with an apartment management company to treat 900 apartments for pest control monthly. In the days before chlordane was banned (April 15, 1988), Hylton bid on termite preconstruction projects, which gave him steady work.

As the pre-treat market became increasingly competitive in the early to mid-1990s, Hylton — like many others in the pest control industry — found he wasn't able to compete with lowballers, and he gradually transitioned the company away from the pre-treat market.

That's when Hylton began taking a serious look at the residential market. It turned out to be a good way for Hylton to marry his entomology skills with his people skills.

"What I started doing was advertising on the radio and that's when we started growing," he said. "We moved from builders and apartment communities, to residential customers and have never looked back. We started marketing heavily through the Yellow Pages, radio and elsewhere."

Radio remains a big marketing tool for Dayton's Pest Control. Hylton says that Dayton's Pest Control has been on as many as eight radio stations, but he has scaled it down to focus on news talk and sports radio primarily — the two formats he says give him the best ROI.

And it's not just *advertising* on radio. Hylton has become an on-air personal-

ity that radio and TV stations turn to for pest control interviews. Says Dayton's wife, Sheila Hylton, "I can't tell you how many times I've been with Dayton out in the community or at church and someone will say, 'You're on the radio. I thought I recognized that voice. I heard you giving an interview about carpenter bees.'"

While he was in college, Hylton was a member of the University of Tennessee tennis team and he lettered in 1977. He promotes his UT affiliation in ads, and this connection plays well in Knoxville, which is home to the University of Tennessee.

SHEILA COMES ON BOARD. The transition to residential services *did* re-energize the company, but after a while growth slowed; change was needed both in terms of operations and growth strategy. An incident in 2003 would re-shape the company for the better. In 2003, Dayton's Pest Control was in a bit of flux as the company's office manager was threatening to quit. Enter Sheila Hylton. "Sheila came in and negotiated with her that [Sheila] would job share with her and let her work three days a week and Sheila would work two days with her while learning other aspects

of the business the other 3 or 4 days of the week (which included most Saturdays), if she would stay with us," Dayton Hylton recalled.

Not only did his office manager stay (for a while), but so did Sheila. A former administrative assistant with Knoxville, Tenn.-based Pilot/Flying J, Sheila used her full-time status to learn the ins-and-outs of Dayton Pest Control and began assessing what improvements might be made.

"Dayton had done a great job with advertising and branding, and the company had a reputation for supporting and giving back to the community, but Dayton was working *in* his business and not *on* his business," Sheila recalled. "I thought we could hire the right people and put processes in place that would help us become more efficient and profitable."

Fast-forward 12 years and Sheila is still a full-time employee who has taken additional steps to become certified and licensed in termite and pest control.

"Since Sheila came on board we've grown from eight employees to 30-plus. She has really helped me with the business part of the company and helped raise Dayton's to another level," said

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Dayton' Pest Control Services prides itself on giving back to the community. Here's a list of charities and the pest services provided by Dayton's:

Emerald Youth Foundation	Quarterly Pest Control/Lady Bug Control
Fellowship Church	Perimeter Quarterly Pest Control/Sentricon
Fish Pantry (Northwest)	Quarterly Pest Control
Fort Kid Playground	Mosquito Control
Habitat for Humanity	Pre-Construction Termite Treatments
Hope Resource Center	Quarterly Pest Control/Mosquito Control
Ronald McDonald House	Quarterly Pest Control
Salvation Army	Monthly Pest Control
Second Harvest Food Bank	Monthly Pest Control
St. Luke's Episcopal	Quarterly Pest Control
The Love Kitchen	Monthly Pest Control/Sentricon
The Restoration House	Perimeter Quarterly Pest Control/ Pre-Construction Termite Treatment
Vestal United Methodist	Quarterly Pest Control
Asbury Methodist	Mosquito Control

Dayton Hylton, who credits Sheila with improving the company culture.

For example, Dayton's Pest Control now has no managers. Instead, they have a team of 10 women in customer service who support the company's 20 service professionals. The firm also re-examined its hiring practices, bringing on board more students with college degrees. Through the Hyltons' church, the couple met and hired Brian George, an intern from Johnson University (formerly Johnson Bible College). This connection has provided a pipeline of eight other students from Johnson University, several of whom joined the company full-time. Currently, 22 of the firm's 31 employees have college degrees, or some college experience. Dayton's just celebrated 30 years in business and this milestone has been accomplished, Dayton Hylton said, thanks to the teamwork of the best employees in the firm's history, and five of those employees have celebrated 10 years with Dayton's. "One of Dayton's benefits is its techs are paid twice the national average, and they are more motivated to work hard and take on ownership and more responsibility."

RETHINKING GROWTH. By having much of the operational responsibilities



A Dayton's Pest Control ad for mosquito services, one of the company's add-on services that has been successful.



Dayton's Pest Control is led by Dayton Hylton, who founded the company in 1985 and wife Sheila, who joined the firm in 2003.

removed from his plate — and by the company getting “the right people on the bus” — Dayton has been able to focus on big-picture ideas like expanding into new markets and launching new services.

For example, Dayton's Pest Control ventured into mosquito control services after hearing Donnie Blake, president of OPC Pest Control, Louisville, Ky., present on this topic at the NPMA Southern Conference. “It's work that we do from May to October, so we've been able to hire seasonal help from college kids. If they can earn \$15 per job and do 10 or more a day, they can make a decent amount of money for school.” Some of these students have gone on to become full-time technicians. Dayton's Pest Control now has 800-plus monthly mosquito control customers.

Other new pest offerings include a service for fall invaders (e.g., ladybugs, brown marmorated stink bugs, kudzu bugs and boxelder bugs) and in the spring the company offers and promotes its carpenter bee program.

Dayton's Pest Control also has ventured outside pest control for some of its add-on services. It now installs the CleanSpace Crawl Space Encapsulation System (Basement Systems), work that keeps the company's service professionals busy during periods when traditional pest control sales are slow. Through the company's affiliation with Basement Systems, they learned about radon testing and in 2010 Dayton's added radon testing and mitigation as a service offering. The result of

these add-on services are many-fold, including: increased sales each year; increased work opportunities for employees; increased benefits for customers; and increased new opportunities for multiple sales per customer.

Dayton's Pest Control is also a great example of a company that really has taken advantage of NPMA networking opportunities. In addition to Donnie Blake's guidance with mosquito services, Al Foster, owner of All American Pest Control, Nashville, Tenn., has shared his expertise on perimeter pest control. Matt and Jay Nixon, American Pest, Fulton, Md., are the company's mentors through NPMA's mentoring program and the Nixons have provided important advice to the Hyltons, particularly with pest control software and adopting handheld technology.

GIVING BACK. While Dayton's Pest Control has evolved significantly throughout the years, the company has always prided itself in taking care of employees, customers and the community. This summer, the company held an outing for employees and families at The Cove on Ft. Loudon Lake, and the company also treated employees to a recent Garth Brooks concert and dinner.

Dayton's Pest Control also provides complimentary pest control services for many non-profit organizations (see story, page 39). Hylton himself plays a leadership role in the University Area Sertoma Club, which supports the Second Harvest Food Bank and its mission of alleviating hunger in East Tennessee. As he said, “The most important measure of our success is our reputation. The work we do is not just a reflection on the business; it is a reflection on us as individuals in this community.”

As Dayton's Pest Control continues its transformation, Dayton says it will stay disciplined to its three principles for success: (1) a continued focus on customer satisfaction and retention; (2) the nurturing of an experienced, trained workforce; and (3) a consistent investment in marketing and business growth. ●

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