

There's power in numbers

Zips Dry Cleaners is proof that good things can happen when (lots of) great minds think alike

If you've ever served on a jury, you know how difficult it is to get a dozen people to agree on a single decision. Now imagine getting 14 people from all walks of life to agree on *every* decision.

That's the situation Zips Dry Cleaners found itself in when the north Virginia chain decided to begin franchising in 2006. The company's board puts the Village People to shame in terms of diversity and includes everyone from a retired El Salvadoran general to an IRS agent to a nuclear energy consultant.

Back in 2001, the 14, who collectively owned eight dry cleaners in the mid-Atlantic, came together as a buying collective to help cut costs. They branded themselves as Zips, pooled their advertising funds and agreed to standardize operating procedures and offer same-day, one-price dry cleaning—currently \$1.99 per garment.

The project worked so well that in 2006 the group decided to franchise and agreed to elect four board members as officers. Every month they get together to hash out the details, a process that's at times raucous, at others tedious.

But that vast array of experience and 10 years of cooperation has allowed Zips to grow to 28 franchises, with another 10 to 15 coming this year.

We spoke to owner Bart Casiello and owner and board chair Brett Vago to find out the true meaning of cooperation. —JASON DALEY

What's it like working with all those people?

Casiello: Having 14 owners is challenging, to say the least. Each one came from owning their own business and is used to making their own decisions. We have a lot of respect for each other, but it's tough to give up control. In the beginning, we would argue over stupid things like how tight to tie hangers together.

We like to say we have to take three votes, because whatever group is most passionate about an issue wins at first. Then the group that loses sways enough people to go in the opposite direction. Then we vote a month later and it can go in any direction. We're only as fast as our slowest owner.

Sounds like Congress. Are there advantages?

Vago: One of the things that has really helped us grow is that we have the same values. Every board member is an operator. That is our best asset. We're testing policies and procedures, making sure they work and fine-tuning them.

Does everyone contribute?

Casiello: Everyone is passionate about something. There are three or four owners interested in equipment. Brett helped design a computer package that can stand up to the heat and lint found in most dry cleaners. My wife works on revenue stuff. I'm involved with advertising and helped develop our own in-store network. Nobody is coasting.

Do you get together outside the boardroom?

Vago: We get together all the time. We go to concerts, several [members] throw annual parties at home. We're a very close-knit group. We probably realize that at some point adding more people is going to occur; I think to be able to take us to the next level we're going to have to expand the ownership pool.

Has it been worth the trouble?

Casiello: I never thought I'd say it, but I enjoy being a dry cleaner. Building a business out of nothing has been exciting. Those board meetings are passionate, but we get things done.



THE CLEAN 14: ZIPS' OWNERS FORGE AHEAD AS A TEAM.