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Suzanne and Roy Felder of Accredited Building Services: Focusing on employee retention in a high-turnover industry.

A clean sweep

After dodging repercussions from the Gulf hurricanes and a union organization last year, janitorial firm Accredited Building Services is still shining

BY CHRISTIE TAYLOR
SPECIAL TO HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Suzanne Felder never imagined her nursing background would help her run a janitorial services company. But since taking over as president of Accredited Building Services three years ago, Felder has breathed new life into the already-healthy company founded by her husband in 1980.

"I really think that my nurse's training gave me an ability to look ahead and see what needs to be done to grow," Felder says. "In

nursing, especially labor and delivery, you always have to be planning ahead, ready for an emergency, and you have to pay incredible attention to detail."

Since joining her husband Roy, co-owner of Accredited Building Services, in the office full-time in 1995, the company has grown. Revenue hit \$3 million in 2003 and \$5 million in 2005. By 2010, the Felders expect that figure to double. Part of their secret is staying calm in a crisis.

ACCREDITED BUILDING SERVICES

BUSINESS: Janitorial services

CO-OWNERS: Suzanne and Roy Felder

FOUNDED: 1980 by Roy Felder

2005 REVENUE: \$5 million

WEB SITE: accreditedbuildingservices.com

STRATEGIES

ACCREDITED: Janitorial company mops up in wake of hurricane-related challenges

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"This year, our biggest challenges were Hurricanes Katrina and Rita," Suzanne Felder says. "We had to quickly mobilize crews for flood relief and water removal in some of our clients' buildings. We cover a good range in Texas, and some of our clients had needs that there was no way we could have predicted."

Accredited Business Services' cleaning crews and fleet of 14 vans were operational when Hurricane Rita struck Beaumont and other parts of coastal Texas in September, damaging some clients' buildings and completely obliterating others. The company's managers quickly organized impromptu crews within 24 hours to help remove water and debris, as many of the employees who normally serviced those clients had already evacuated the area.

"Our crews were given special passes so they could get past the state troopers," Felder says. "In some cases, we found out our crews didn't have enough food, so I went out and bought food and water so they could work. We had to haul water in daily to clean, and there was no power. Basically, they were cleaning the uncleanable."

Having survived both hurricanes, another potential disturbance hit in November when the Service Employees International Union organized in Houston for the first time. That union signed up as many as 5,000 janitorial workers from Houston's four largest cleaning companies, galvanizing workers wanting better benefits and higher pay.

Suzanne says the union's presence in

Houston should have little impact on Accredited Building Services, a locally owned company with 350 employees servicing 325 sites. None of Accredited Building Services' employees are part of the union.

"I am aware of what is going on with the union, but that is someone else's company," she says. "I choose to focus on our people and our business, and if an employee has an issue, my door is open."

'Some people might have the idea that cleaning is easy — you come in with a mop and a bucket. But to do a good job, you have to give the employee enough time to get it done and provide them the cleaning tools to work well.'

Suzanne Felder
Accredited Building Services

According to the Building Services Contractors Association International, a professional membership association, employee turnover in the building services industry averages 30 percent to 40 percent. With the industry growing by an average of 7 percent each year, that attrition rate presents a real challenge.

"The turnover in the industry is high, but after talking with other company owners from other states, ours is lower,"

Felder says. "You don't just take care of your clients, you take care of your employees. You take care of them the way you would yourself."

Accredited Building Services counteracts the industry's high turnover rate by providing clear paths for career advancement, Felder says, looking for new employees through referral and providing them with what they need to do their jobs. Some employees have worked for Accredited Building Services for 15 years, rising through the ranks from cleaning crew member to manager. The Felders encourage employees to present new ideas. And when feasible, they implement them.

"Some people might have the idea that cleaning is easy — you come in with a mop and a bucket," Felder says. "But to do a good job, you have to give the employee enough time to get it done and provide them the cleaning tools to work well."

ADDING POLISH

Last year, Accredited Building Services implemented an inventory tracking system to monitor equipment and supplies at each site. Now one full-time employee delivers whatever is needed from the company's Houston warehouse to each building, making sure vacuums are in working order and that employees have supplies they need.

"When you really track your inventory on a month-to-month basis, you begin to see where maybe you're taking more to a building that you didn't need, and by tracking it you're going to have less wastage," Felder says. "You really can decrease the amount of money you spend simply by knowing where it's going. We

never found a building where we were taking too little, but we did find situations where we were taking too much."

The Felders discovered this tracking system through membership in Building Service Contractors Association International, and decided on this particular software program because of its customer service component. This software allows Accredited Building Services to implement a "virtual logbook" for customers to track requests, a feature that will be available in February to all clients through Accredited Building Service's Web site.

Jack Hall, property manager for NewQuest Properties, an Accredited Building Services client, says even without the virtual logbook feature, his concerns have always been addressed immediately.

Hall uses the company to service buildings on Grant Road, in Texas City and at FM 1960 and Interstate 45.

"No janitorial service is perfect, I don't care what they say," he says. "But very seldom have I had a repeat complaint. Whenever I do have a problem, they take care of it immediately."

Felder says responding quickly with high-quality service is the company's main objective as it strives to reach \$10 million in revenue by 2010.

"We want to develop long-term relationships with companies and vendors, whether it's building owners, nonprofits, churches or private schools," she says. "We want to work with other companies who want to have that trusting relationship with us as a common goal." ■

CHRISTIE TAYLOR is a Houston-based freelance writer.