

California Sweeping Firm On Track for the Future

by Bob Merrigan

When Universal Building Services was founded more than 40 years ago, it was a two-person, “mom-and-pop” cleaning company operating out of a garage.

But with its commitment to high quality and cost-effective service, the company was bound to grow. Not just in size – UBS is now a major regional entity with corporate headquarters in Richmond, California – but also in scope of services.

“The company got into sweeping because they had customers who needed to keep their parking lots clean,” explains Bill Godfrey, Manager of the UBS Power Sweeping Division. “When I came on board 22 years ago, sweeping was still a secondary service; the primary focus was cleaning.”

Today, Godfrey oversees one of the largest sweeping businesses in the Bay area. The UBS Power Sweeping Division maintains an extensive fleet of power sweepers of all sizes and types and works with a full range of municipal, parking lot, warehouse and construction customers. The business is split, roughly half construction and half contract sweeping.

When asked to explain the company’s growth, Godfrey refers back to the company’s original commitment to high quality, cost-effective service. Pressed for further explanation, he admits this goal is only possible if accompanied by a willingness to try new approaches and a commitment to measure the results.

He cites the UnitedPro Strip Broom’s from United Rotary Brush Corporation as one example of this approach.

“Nationwide Wire and Brush (*which merged with United Rotary Brush in 2002*) was our broom provider from the time I started with Universal,” Godfrey relays. “When they came to me and wanted an opinion on a new strip broom product, I figured we could put it through the paces for them.”

At the time, UBS was using cable-wrap brooms for its construction sweeping projects. (*Godfrey is also quick to point out the importance of using the right broom for the right job!*) In addition, they had just taken on a major project that would allow him to compare the two brooms side by side: eight hours a day, five days a week, over a four month period.

“I knew that we needed something that would give us an apples-to-apples comparison,” Godfrey explains. “We track maintenance on vehicles based on overall engine hours. But, that includes time traveling from job site to job site, so you’re not giving the broom a fair shake.”

“So, we installed an electrical hour meter, powered through the on/off switch to the broom itself to track the number of hours the brooms were in use and give us an accurate reading of durability.”

Godfrey expected his cable wrap brooms to last 120 to 140 hours. Over the test period, he found the new strip broom lasted an additional 30 to 40 hours ... “on-the-ground-working” hours.



Godfrey's willingness to try new approaches is backed up by a commitment to measure the results



The curvature in the broom furrows material toward the center of the elevator and helps minimize trailing.

“What’s more, it swept better. There’s a curvature in the broom that furrows the material toward the center of the elevator and loads it into the hopper more evenly,” he continues. “And, because it takes material away from the sidewalls, it also creates less of a trailing problem, which our drivers really liked.

“When we removed the stub shaft to change the cable wrap, it gave our mechanics a chance to check the conveyor, inspect the elevator bushings and elevator floor,” he says. “It’s a proactive step, a chance to avoid more serious maintenance problems and I didn’t want to forego that.”

Again, Godfrey carefully tracked comparisons. He found it took about the same amount of time to change the 21 strips as it did to pull the stub shafts off and slide a new cable wrap into place. It took much less effort, though; each strip weighs less than five pounds and at no point was the mechanic “manhandling a five-foot tall, 350-pound broom.” In addition, once the strips were off it was very easy for the mechanic to inspect the inside of the elevator.

Godfrey was convinced, and decided to convert eight of his 14 mobile trucks to the strip brooms. That’s when he discovered an advantage he hadn’t yet counted on... shipping and storage.

“Eight tube brooms require roughly four pallets; right now I have 10 strip brooms sitting on one,” Godfrey explains. “That’s significant, both in storage space and shipping costs.”

Ironically enough, despite his enthusiastic support, Godfrey did not mention the one feature that drove the development of the UnitedPro Strip Broom, according to Harry Vegter, Director of Engineering at United Rotary Brush Corporation who oversaw the effort.



The strip brooms cut shipping and storage by up to 75%.

“There were other strip brooms on the market when we started working on this back in the early '90's,” Vegter relays. “But they were all metal backed strips with tufts of polypropylene.”

“We felt the metal backing was a disadvantage. It made the strip harder to push in. Then it would rust, and was even more difficult to remove.”

“We felt we could not only address this issue, but could also create a product that is recyclable. While that may not be a primary concern for a sweeping company today, it will continue to become an increasingly important consideration... not just for them, but for their customers.”

Godfrey acknowledges that California’s support for recycling and environmental awareness is among the strongest in the nation. And, he’s optimistic about being able to address his customers’ concerns.

After all, that’s what Universal Building Services has been doing since it was founded!

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