

ARA Retailer of the Year: Willard Agri-Service Sells Knowledge

Focus is on helping customers be more profitable.

■ By Richard Keller, editor



Willard Agri-Service was started by De Willard [center]. His two sons, Bob [left] and Bill are handling day-to-day management of the company today.

Willard Agri-Service has served the farmers of the Chesapeake Bay watershed for 40 years expanding from one operation to five large-volume locations specializing in the manufacture and application of liquid fertilizer.

It was 1970 when DeWalt “De” Willard opened his first ag retail operation in Fredrick, Md., which became the first of what now totals five liquid fertilizer manufacturing plants. The four additional manufacturing facilities opened since then are Mt. Airy, Md., in 1973; Lynch, Md., in 1982; Marion, Penn., in 1985 and Greenwood, Del., in 2004.

De Willard was a farmer, custom combiner and custom pesticide applicator before deciding to open the first Agri-Service retail operation with custom application services. Today, Willard Agri-Service is a family affair with sons Bob Willard, eastern shore president, and Bill Willard, western shore president, providing the majority of the daily management, although their father is chairman of the board and still actively involved.

“We sell knowledge and finance that by selling fertilizer,” said Bob Willard. “Our mission is to help our customers do better. I truly believe this, and I’ve told farmers if we can’t help them do better, then they should throw us off the farm. We work really hard to help them.”

Mike Twining, general manager for the Lynch and Greenwood operations, said, “It is a value-based organization. I can definitely say that our whole culture is focused around

helping our customers make more money. It is not just a fancy slogan. We live and breathe it every day. The Willards have invested above and beyond what is necessary to have top-notch facilities. They also invest in their people and programs to serve the farmers.”

For accomplishing their mission and much more, Willard Agri-Service was selected as the ARA Retailer of the Year for 2009, and the award was presented during the December ARA annual meeting. Judging criteria included effective employee relations, environmental stewardship, community and industry leadership, relationship building, technology utilization and innovative business practices.

An important computer program developed in conjunction with Willard Agri-Service to assist its farmers was the High Q program. This program provides

composite information about results from using various farming inputs in different ways and also maintains specific data about each customer’s fields. “High Q started in 1996 with seven growers out of our Lynch location,” Twining noted.

Today, High Q is used by several ag retailers in the Corn Belt and South. Data from more than 100,000 acres of the Delmarva is fed into the program each year and more than one-half million acres of data from other areas of the nation goes into the computer program. This compilation of data includes all the various information gathered from precision agriculture equipment used by farmers and ag retail/custom applicators.

“High Q is a program designed to allow our growers to ask data questions and get answers that they can use to make more profitable decisions with less risk,” Twining said.

“It is surprising the information that we have gleaned out of High Q over the years that has put money into our customers’ pockets,” Willard said.

COMPANY EMPLOYEES ARE KEY

Besides crediting the High Q program with some of the company’s success, Willard also credits the company’s employees. “It is important that we have partnered with our employees for the long term. I like to think we have come up with win-win situations where they do well and it causes us



Willard Agri-Service has five large-volume liquid fertilizer locations from which product is manufactured and trucked.

to do well,” he said. “When you have people come to your organization to make it their career, that is when you are going to have a great business if they are the right people, and we have the right people.

Larry Martin, general manager of two Maryland and the Pennsylvania locations, said, “The leadership of the Willards has really been important, and what has been crucial is the hiring of quality people and the retention of people. Each location has people who have worked for the company more than 20 years, which is almost unheard of in any industry anymore. That tells you that they are treated so that they want to stay and keep doing what they are doing with opportunity for promotion.”

Martin knows of what he speaks. The comments come from an employee who started working for the company 35 years ago as a sales representative and custom applicator.

LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEADERSHIP

“It boils down to leadership starting with De. He would continuously look for ways to expand the business, look for innovative ways to help our growers. We figured if we could help our growers, we would attain more business and be



Larry Martin

profitable, and his sons have maintained that leadership along with their father,” Martin said.

Additionally, Martin maintains that the Willards have shown leadership locally and nationally, which has been good for the company. “They recognize that they have to give back, and they also receive by serving, too,” he said. “They have brought back ideas

they’ve learned about by being involved in organizations. They have used those ideas to help our company grow, but the Willards have also given a lot of time in serving as officers of organizations. All three of them have spent a lot of time working within industry organizations.”

Willard Agri-Service has grown following a somewhat different model than many other companies. “Our theory for business has always been that each location needs to be a big plant. We only have five locations, but our operations tend to be a lot bigger than many other companies’ locations,” Willard said. “Our concept is that once we get liquid fertilizer into the nurse truck it doesn’t matter much if we go five miles or 25 miles.” Each Willard location competes with an average of five or six competitor locations.

BIG BUSINESS AND GROWING

Overall, Willard Agri-Service has almost 50 applicators and nearly 100 nurse trucks in its fleet, a third of them semi-tanker trucks. Willard noted that almost 95 percent of the liquid fertilizer sold by the company was custom applied 15 years ago but that percentage has decreased to about 80 percent today



Bob Willard [left] talks with Mike Twining in the Greenwood location office.

with many more large farmer operations in the area. The company has started to embrace selling fertilizer and chemicals

without custom application, but definitely prefers selling custom application with scouting services and High Q benefits.

What might surprise many is that Willard Agri-Service has many customers larger than the average farming operations of Iowa or Illinois. “People look at our states and their size, and they say that we must serve a bunch of little truck farmers. Our largest customer with the company farms 14,000 acres,” Willard said.

Ninety percent of the company’s business is retail to farmers with the rest of the business being related to lawn care retail operations and wholesale liquid fertilizer sales.

Willard said, “We are still looking to grow. You can’t just say this is as big as we are going to get because you end up going backward.” **AG**

OVERFLOW