

# Award-Winning SERVICE COMPANY

## Prosperes with Education/ Industry Involvement

by Ron Derven

**AQUA POOL & PATIO**, East Windsor, Connecticut, recently garnered a top award in NESPA's Service Awards of Excellence Competition, a rigorous program in which NESPA contacts a number of a company's service customers to rate its overall quality of service, repairs and customer service. Michael Giannamore, president and owner of Aqua Pool and Patio, attributes its success in the NESPA competition to employee morale, ongoing education for all and industry involvement.

**T**he company opens and closes between 800-1000 pools and spas each season and has 250 weekly service customers in Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. It has 18 technicians on the road and five office staff, including Michael. The company responds to its customers 24/7, not just during the season, but throughout the year.

Aqua Pool & Patio is the umbrella organization of two legal entities: Aqua Pool & Patio Inc., which handles pool building and was named one of the top 50 pool builders in the country in 2014; and Aqua Pool & Patio Service Corp., which runs the service operations of the firm. Michael is owner of the service company and general manager of the pool building company. His father, Ron, continues as a consultant to the pool building firm.

The story of the Giannamore family's involvement in Aqua Pool & Patio started in 1970. Ron Giannamore is an engineer, and after working and teaching engineering for a number of years and being awarded 13 patents for electronic inventions, he purchased a swimming pool from Aqua Pool & Patio. He was so impressed with the quality of the pool and the company that he went to work for the firm in 1972 and began to use his engineering skills to design pools. In 1974, he became a partner; a few years later he became the owner.

As pool building flourished in Connecticut during the 1980s, the company established a service arm to ensure that its customers received the high level of service they deserved. At the time, Michael Giannamore was a teenager, but unbeknownst to him, he was on a dual education track at the time. In college,

he was pursuing a master's degree in education. When he was off from school, unlike his friends who were enjoying the summer or travelling abroad, he was servicing pools. Michael's grandfather, who came to America from Italy in 1910 at the age of 11 and alone, instilled in the family a powerful work ethic and an undiminished passion for education and learning.

### NO JOBS IN EDUCATION

In the early 1990s, Michael graduated with a master's in education. The problem was, few school systems were hiring; in fact, most were drastically cutting back on teachers. When Michael did have an opportunity to apply for a job, he was competing against 300 other would-be teachers. Then, over one Fourth of July weekend, Aqua Pool & Patio's service manager suddenly quit



Beautifully decorated Aqua Pool & Patio Service trucks hit the road in Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

her job. Ron Giannamore came to his son and told him to either take the job himself or help him hire a new service manager. His father warned him, however, that if he took the job he had to stop looking for a teaching position because the elder Giannamore did not want to be without a service manager in the midst of the pool closing season in September.

Michael took the job and stopped looking for teaching positions. His father's response: "We'll see how long this lasts." Both men get a laugh out of that comment today, because 25 years later, Michael is still at the company.

"When I took over the business, my entire conversation with my father about goal-setting came down to: 'Grow the service business.' With no business degree, this was a challenging for me, but he did offer other words of wisdom. He said: 'Hire the staff and the work will come; just keep hiring. When you need a truck, buy a truck,'" recalled Michael.

Probably because of his degree in education and his utter lack of a business background, Michael set himself on a lifelong path to learn all he could about the pool and spa service business. Even as a veteran of 25 years, he is not one to take the attitude "been there, done that." Rather, he said: "I listen to others and I want to learn from others."

This was probably a key reason that 15 years ago he became a member of the Connecticut Spa and Pool Association (CONSPA) Board of Directors. Yes, Michael is absolutely committed to bettering the industry in Connecticut and throughout the region, but he also wants to learn from the unusual group

of world-class pool and spa professionals who make up the CONSPA Board.

### A STAFF THAT CARES

What separates this award-winning service company from the also-rans? The key is having a staff that really cares, responded Michael. "Clients here in the Northeast who can afford an inground swimming pool demand a high level of service for the money they are paying," he said. "The only way we can deliver high-quality service is to have a staff that really cares about what they are doing."

How do you put such a staff together? Here are tips from Aqua Pool and Patio:

**Stress education** – The company sometimes takes up to 25 employees to The Pool and Spa Show in Atlantic City for the educational opportunities it provides. It also takes full advantage of all educational opportunities at NESPA, CONSPA and from manufacturers and distributors throughout the year. "When I go to a Bio-Guard seminar for eight hours, for example, if I can come back with just one idea, I consider that a successful program," said Michael.

**Push industry certification** – Of the company's 18 service techs, nine of them, including Michael, are Connecticut state licensed technicians. Everyone has Association of Pool & Spa Professionals and NESPA training. Several have Certified Maintenance Specialist (CMS) certifications. "I keep most of my staff from year to year, but in a typical year, I hire four new people. Two usually work out. At the end of that first season, I push those new hires to get educated."

**Help service techs to have a career, not just a job** – Pay service techs well so that



Michael Giannamore

they have a life and career, not just a job. "I pay my people well and my technicians get a commission on every screw and every O-ring that comes off the service truck," said Michael. In addition, the company contributes money to a 401k for employees whether they contribute on their own or not. The company covers health insurance and issues Christmas bonuses, and most of the staff gets paid vacation. All get paid holidays.

**Send staff into a customer's backyard that you would want in your own backyard** – "I only want people working in my backyard who I can trust and who are courteous, cordial and respectful. Those are the types of people I send into my customers' backyards," said Michael. All Aqua Pool & Patio techs wear uniforms paid for by Aqua Pool & Patio.

**Go paperless, improve efficiency** – The company has gone paperless to meet the demanding schedules of its customers. It uses GPS on every vehicle and has trained all techs on tablets or smartphones. "To make miracles happen during pool opening season," said Michael, "efficiency is everything." |

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