

ENTREPRENEUR

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Many companies would be happy with a major manufacturer as a client. Gary Wilson, however, decided it was not the path to long-term success for Master Lift Truck Services, so he severed ties. Today, the company is its own master and business is brisk.



Gary Wilson, the 40-year-old president and founder of Master Lift Truck Services, took his future firmly in both hands last spring, won the support of his 65 staff and set off on a course that will dramatically change the nature of what his company does to earn its daily bread.

For the past seven years, since Mr. Wilson created the Oakville, Ont., company by acquiring a string of four small dealerships, Master Lift took a traditional approach to the fork lift sales and service business. It had a deal with a large foreign company to sell and provide after sales service for its line of industrial fork lifts.

At the time, Mr. Wilson saw it as a significant coup.

"Representing a major manufacturer is a big deal in this industry," he says. "If you don't, you are looked down on. You are not one of the big players, you are an independent."

The problem was that while Master Lift might have gained a certain market in the industry, the foreign company tended to call the shots.

"They were not concerned with my company's growth; all they wanted was growth in their market share," he says. "They would tell me I needed 14 more people, not four. They had no interest in me maintaining healthy margins."

"For them it was just market share, market share, market share. We seemed to be working for them and that was definitely not what I wanted for this company."

As he explains it, matters came to a head last year. Mr. Wilson says it was one of those situations where he really did not know what he wanted for Master Lift but he knew it was not what he had.

He sat down with his own management team and an outside marketing consultant and began brainstorming. The object was to create a path for the future where Master Lift would indeed be master of its own destiny; a path that would brand the company in such a way that it quickly rose above the clutter of competing dealerships and products.

"That branding was essential," he says. "In this business everyone talks the same. They all trumpet the ruggedness, the dependability of their products. I wanted us to be different, to be more effective reaching decision makers."

Those brain-storming sessions resulted in two very important decisions. The first was to establish its own branded Master Lift line of vehicles. To do that, Mr. Wilson hopped a jet to China and in Hangzhou, three hours west of Shanghai, found a factory that could produce private label Masterlift trucks at a level of quality and a price that could not just compete with the major manufacturers but better them.

With a two-month delivery time, Master Lift could get stock to its Oakville and St. Thomas, Ont., dealerships from China faster than it had been able to get fork lifts from its previous supplier in Texas.

The second decision was all about branding. Almost all other dealerships focused on selling to management; Master Lift would talk straight to the drivers. After all, they were the ones who spent eight hours a day or more on the vehicles. They were invariably consulted by management before purchase decisions were made. Grab their attention and support and you might have powerful allies, Mr. Wilson reckoned.

"Our surveys showed drivers wanted a really cool machine," he says. "They wanted something they could personalize, that would be fun to drive, that looked great."

So last spring, Master Lift dramatically changed the way it did business. Down from show rooms walls came pictures of other fork lift trucks and up went photos



Master Lift founder Gary Wilson says his line of customized vehicles draws 1,000 hits a day to the company Web site.

and posters of customized Masterlift trucks, Master Lift staff and those of a new line called Truck from Kingston.

"We started selling ourselves for a change," he adds.

The Web site (www.postponytrift.ca) began to bounce with not just new, locally painted Masterlift trucks but with accessories such as shell-shaped gear shift knobs. Inquiries started pouring in from as far as Israel. Mr. Wilson says it is not unusual for the site to receive 1,000 hits a day.

Better yet, Master Lift can now sell anything from 1,000-pound to 80,000-pound-capacity machines at up to 20% less than the competition.

Mr. Wilson readily admits support from his staff has been crucial. "It won't, if I introduced a profit-sharing plan that allows employees to benefit directly if this bold new strategy is successful."

"It also helps focus their attention on the bottom line," he says.

He unveiled the new strategy and the profit-sharing plan at a staff meeting at the Harbour Castle Hotel in Toronto early in January. "They had an open mind

but would not work," he says.

As it turned out, he was both a bit surprised and enormously heartened by how quickly they grasped the need for change and how wholeheartedly they embraced his direction for the future, he says.

"We are heavily into it, so results to date are entirely anecdotal," he says. "But from what we see so far, this is definitely the right road for a company like this."

He has only limited concern about relying on a Chinese factory to supply his trucks. If that factory decides to become a competitor there are plenty more fish in that sea, he says.

"Even that area in China alone there are probably 500 other factories I can go to," he says.

Perhaps the most important result of the dramatic shake-up is that Master Lift is finally its own master. The focus is now where it should be, on the growth and financial well-being of Mr. Wilson's company and his staff.

"Granted, time will tell but from everything we have seen to date I am pretty certain we are on the right road," he says.

MASTER LIFT TRUCK SERVICES INC.

Head office Oakville, Ont.
Business sector Sale, servicing of fork lift trucks
Market Southern Ontario
Number of Employees 65
Web site www.masterlift.com

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