

Making it in a dirty business

By Al Lewis

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John Griffith got a college degree and ended up as a trash man anyway. At 37, he runs Alpine Waste & Recycling with more than 30 trucks, 50 employees and a \$5 million recycling plant near 53rd Avenue and Broadway that will mark its grand opening Wednesday.

All of this he started from a bungalow in Washington Park in 1999.

"We had one truck and one guy," he said. "We built it from there."

Griffith gave me a tour of his new plant during a test run last week. I stood beside rolling conveyor belts, watching garbage whiz by: bottles, cans, boxes, old CDs and even discarded copies of my own column - which I suppose beats lining a bird cage or wrapping a fish. That Oscar guy from "Sesame Street" would have died.

A fast-fingered crew pulled out glass and cardboard. Machines with whirling disks and magnets did the rest. By the end of the line, what had resembled trash was starting to look like raw material, compressed into forklift-ready bundles, much of it bound for China. (We buy their garbage, and they buy ours.)

Griffith has been in it for the long haul.

After graduating from the University of Colorado with a business degree in 1992, he took a job as a management trainee at Sears. In 1994, he wanted to get into sales - but the only company that would pay him well was a trash hauler called BFI.

At BFI, Griffith learned the business as a string of mergers changed the landscape. Between 1995 and 1999, BFI and several other players merged into what is now Allied Waste, and many other companies consolidated to become what is now Waste Management.

Griffith decided it was the perfect time to start his own company.

"You had all these different companies merging, and there were a lot of people who didn't know their (garbage collector) anymore," he said. "They didn't recognize their trucks, they didn't know their reps, pickup times changed ... and a lot of people were disgruntled." Griffith targeted business customers exclusively, setting his sights on folks who were tired of closing Dumpster lids, shutting gates or picking up spilled trash.

"Some of these guys drive up in the big front loaders and get kind of lazy," Griffith said. "They drive up, stab the Dumpster and leave. They never get out of their seats. ... And the mentality of a lot of the big companies was, 'Our guys are drivers, not janitors.'" Today, Alpine's biggest customers include Starbucks, Whole Foods, Walgreens, Chipotle, CB Richard Ellis commercial property management and some local homeowners associations.

"If customers approach our drivers, they are trained to respond 'yes, sir' or 'no, ma'am,'" Griffith said. "We dress in uniforms with our shirts tucked in and our hats forward, which seems like something a normal service person ought to do, but in our industry, when you think of trash men, it conjures up an image of big, scary dudes."

Griffith raised \$700,000 to start his company at a time when most investors wanted

a ".com" at the end of a name.

His brother-in-law, Alek Orloff, who serves as chief financial officer, built financial models. He also hired Brent Hildebrand from Waste Management to serve as vice president of recycling.

Griffith said Alpine is on track to do \$8 million worth of business this year. By contrast, some of his competitors measure their sales in the billions.

Recycling is getting to be a big business. "People look for the businesses they patronize to be green," Griffith said. But as Oscar's friend Kermit will attest, it's not easy being green.

Alpine built much of its business plan around the idea that it would collect a single stream of refuse - from pop cans, beer bottles and milk jugs to newsprint and copy paper - and deliver it to a Waste Management recycling plant.

Waste Management has an exclusive contract with the city and county of Denver, largely because of its capabilities to sort through this single stream of waste. Waste Management eagerly accepted Alpine's trucks until one day when it inexplicably stopped, according to Griffith.

"They let us bring it in for six months, and then they cut us off," he said. Alpine was left in the lurch, but instead of disappointing customers, it began hauling to another plant in Fort Collins, 80 miles north. Meantime, Alpine laid plans to build its own recycling plant. Now that this plant is opening its doors to all comers, Waste Management has reopened to outside haulers as well, Griffith said.

Waste Management spokesman Charles Bayley tells a different story. He says Waste Management's recycling plant has always been open to other waste haulers. Alpine wasn't cut off. It simply couldn't come to terms with Waste Management, Bayley said.

"We were accepting their material on a handshake basis," he said. "What we did was offer them a contractual arrangement."

Whatever the case, Alpine has opted for an arrangement of its own.

"Prior to the opening of this plant, Alpine and its customers had been at the mercy of a single operator in the Denver area," Griffith said. "Today ... we begin to enjoy the benefits of the American system of market competition."

Nothing wrong with a little competition - even if it's just for trash.

Al Lewis' column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays.