



Unique Industries

by Eric Peterson on June 3, 2017, 09:18 am MDT

www.uniqueindustries.com

Denver

Founded: 1973

Privately owned

Employees: 6

Industry: Built Environment; Contract & Industrial

Products: Masonry cleaning systems

Owner and President Randy Weil is marketing his company's longstanding brickwork-cleaning technology to masons all over the world.

A mason by trade, Charlie Hewett came up with the Kem-O-Kleen system in the early 1970s to clean unwanted excess mortar off newly built brick walls. Because mortar is alkaline, the status quo involved a bucket of diluted muriatic acid, and a brush with a long handle.

"He figured there had to be a better way," says Weil. "He devised a system to apply the solution under pressure." Hewlett's Kem-O-Kleen system was essentially a pressure washer that could stand up to

the acid. "If you do that with a regular pressure washer, you'll ruin it pretty quickly," says Weil, noting that the product has to be "acid-proof, not acid-resistant."



Hewlett created just that when he started the company, and many of his products have withstood decades of use and abuse. "I can find you machines built in the late 1970s," says Weil, who bought the company in 2006 after holding senior executive positions at AT&T, IHS, and Cummins.

Upon leaving IHS in 2005, Weil hit pause on his career before his next move. "I took a year off, climbed mountains, took guitar lessons, and visited friends and family," he says.

After the self-imposed sabbatical, Weil decided to buy a business. "What I was looking for was either manufacturing or wholesale distribution," he says. He whittled 25 targets down to a few before settling on Unique. "I'm more of a mechanical guy," he says of the decision. "The fact it was a machine appealed to me."



The trailer-mounted Kem-O-Kleen machines can stream the solution at 3,000 psi, and feature a patented method of inducing acid from a 20-gallon tank into a stream powered by a gasoline-powered motor. Unique sells the machines direct to masons and industrial customers for \$14,000 to \$20,000. The market is worldwide, as Weil says that about 15 percent of sales are exports.

It all comes back to a solid return on investment. "The pressures on the mason are greater than they seem," he says. "The job's not complete until it's clean."

While the purpose remains the same, the company has innovated and improved upon the Kem-O-Kleen concept over the years. "If you look at the 1970s machine for masonry Charlie Hewlett developed and a machine today, they would look similar, but every single part is different," says Weil. "On that machine alone over 11 years, there have been 70 different changes."



In 2009, Unique started reselling Val6 infrared heaters, and the company had also made a variant on the Kem-O-Kleen for the precast concrete industry since 2009. It's larger, meant to be stationary, and features on an electric motor instead of a gasoline one like the Kem-O-Kleen and a natural gas burner. He says customers have an ROI of about a year and a half by saving labor, energy, and maintenance costs.

Unique's offices and manufacturing space are located at a 12,000-square-foot facility in central Denver. Weil works closely with Ron Baer, who formerly was part of the ownership team at Denver-based Famous Amos and TeleCheck.

Challenges: "Like with most small businesses, it's continuing to get the word out to prospects," says Weil. "There are a lot of masonry companies in the U.S. -- about 200,000. We've got just a small fraction of that market."

He's doing some advertising and a lot of good old-fashioned cold calling to get the word out. The aim is "getting down to that micro level rather than hoping a mass-media ad will hit the target," says Weil. "We can get on the phone and call every mason in Kansas."

Masonry's resistance to change is an obstacle, he adds, as many masons still to use a bucket of acid and a long brush. "It's a very traditional industry. 'My grandfather was a mason and he did it that way. My dad was a mason and he did it that way. It's good enough for me.'"



Opportunities: "I think there's still a world of opportunity for masonry in the U.S., and it's easier to sell our machines," says Weil. "We're looking at the tilt-up concrete industry."

Needs: "Our biggest need is to continue to drive demand," says Weil. "Can we build a good quality machine? Yep. Do we have inventory? Yep. Are we well-capitalized? Yep."