

Water to your door

Service a key for DS Waters

By Don Sadler

IF YOU'RE LIKE many people, you're paying much closer attention to what you eat—and drink. This includes the most essential beverage to life: water.

While most Americans can access water with the simple turn of a faucet handle, tap or well water isn't always the tastiest or healthiest option. Instead, millions of people rely on home or office delivery of high-quality bottled water.

"A century ago, getting clean drinking water was one of the first things doctors and pharmacists recommended when people got sick," says Dillon Schickli, CEO of DS Waters, an Atlanta-based company that produces and distributes bottled water products directly to homes, offices and retail establishments across the U.S. "So these companies started hauling spring water, and, over time, water delivery became a cottage industry."

Customers today opt for bottled water service for many different reasons: consistent water taste and quality, of course, as well as safety and environmental concerns. "Our customers can always have a supply of 5-gallon water bottles on hand in case of an emergency, like a storm or a boil-water order," Schickli says. "Also, using a bottled water service is much more environmentally friendly than buying small bottles of water. We use 100 percent recycled bottles in some our markets."

Tapping into customer service

DS Waters was incorporated in 1985, but some of its brands—such as Alhambra®, Belmont Springs®, Deep Rock®, Hinckley Springs® and Mount Olympus®—go back more than 100 years.

Schickli and two business partners bought

DS Waters in 2005. At the time, the company was struggling to operate efficiently after consolidating about a third of the fragmented U.S. home and office water delivery market.

"When we bought DS Waters, the company had lost its way" says Schickli. He and his partners were able to turn the company around by implementing some fundamental changes, including cutting costs, streamlining operations and an increasing the emphasis on customer service.

In fact, customer service is the most important success factor in the bottled water delivery business, according to Schickli. "This is a service business, not a water business," he stresses. "So the biggest key to our success is consistently delivering a quality product directly to our customers' homes and offices.

"We currently serve more than 1.2 million home and office customer locations, and our service area directly covers more than 80 percent of U.S. ZIP codes," he explains. "With more than 5,000 associates, we don't always get everything right the first time—but we make sure we get it right the next time.

"We have built a culture of customer service and attention to detail, and we measure our results every day," says Schickli. "We grow our company one customer at a time—serving our customers properly is the most direct path to growth, since keeping the satisfied customers we have makes it easier to grow."

Liquid assets

As you'd probably expect, stringent standards and procedures are in place to ensure that bottled water is pure and safe. "Producing crisp, refreshing, great-tasting water is much

supplier profile

Company: DS Waters

CEO: Dillon Schickli

Number of employees:
More than 5,000

Address:

5660 New Northside Drive, Suite 500
Atlanta, GA 30328

Contact: 1-800-728-5508,
www.water.com

Products available at Costco: Home and office delivery of bottled water available through Costco Services (go to Costco.com, click on "Services" and then "Water Delivery")

Comments about Costco: "I have been a loyal member of Costco for over 15 years. They are masters of customer service and management of their membership, focusing on delivering value and great service every day."—*Dillon Schickli*

harder than it looks," says Schickli. "The bottled water industry is regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and we are required to meet very strict standards."

DS Waters is taking an active role in the fight against breast cancer by donating proceeds from the sale of Athena® water to breast cancer awareness, research and education. The company has committed to contributing more than \$2 million to the fight against breast cancer via Susan G. Komen for the Cure and the American Cancer Society.

"This is our company cause," says Schickli. "We're committed to doing everything we can to help find the cure for this deadly disease."

And in case you're wondering, the "DS" in DS Waters does not stand for Dillon Schickli, he is quick to point out. "Lots of people ask me that," he reports, "but it's just a huge coincidence." ☐

Don Sadler is a freelance writer in Atlanta.