DeCarolis adapts to thrive in truck leasing business

By VELVET SPICER

After more than half a century on the job, Paul DeCarolis says he now works half-time.

“I work the first half or the second half,” said the 77-year-old chairman of DeCarolis Truck Rental Inc.

DeCarolis gets his work ethic from his father, Louis DeCarolis Sr., who founded the family business 80 years ago when he bought a truck and used it to transport laborers to and from farmers’ fields.

It wasn’t long before the elder DeCarolis was hauling produce to processing plants, and with that he created a small carting company called DeCarolis Trucking Co. Early on, DeCarolis focused on heavy-duty trucking and outside repairs, sometimes renting out its own equipment to customers. Before long, DeCarolis had added a truck terminal, and during the 1950s expanded into warehousing.

The family business grew quickly when DeCarolis added a truck stop, a Diamond Reo truck dealership, a Thermo King refrigeration franchise and a rental and leasing company.

DeCarolis died in 1961 and was succeeded by two sons, Louis Jr. and Paul. Paul came out of the shop to assume the presidency five years later when Louis Jr. was killed in a plane crash. He was determined that the family business would become a leader in transportation services.

To that end, in 1968 DeCarolis began to phase out much of the sales and outside service of the business in order to focus exclusively on the rental and full-service leasing side.

Today, DeCarolis offers full service commercial leasing, short- and long-term commercial vehicle rental, service and maintenance, collision and repair and heavy duty parts. DeCarolis is part of NationalLease, a nationwide collaborative of 150 truck leasing organizations that provides service for the other businesses.

The company has some 170 staffers at seven locations across the state, including Rochester, Buffalo, Binghamton, Elmira, Geneva, Henrietta and Syracuse. While DeCarolis officials declined to divulge revenues for the privately held firm, company president Michael Margarone said growth has been good the last several years.

“We’ve had consistent growth in all our markets,” Margarone said, noting that the company earlier this year divested its bus company, Monroe School Transportation Inc. “Right now rentals are very active.”

The business has changed dramatically through the years, DeCarolis and Margarone said.

“Where I think the business has changed is in the technology,” Margarone said. “The new equipment has gotten more complex and much more expensive. The corner garage can’t work on the units. You’ve got to have more skilled technicians and equipment in both hardware and software to diagnose and service the units.”

Investment has increased focus on maintenance and repairs. Technology has made equipment more complex, which has steered customers to utilize our services even more,” DeCarolis added. “We have the infrastructure and longevity to make it happen.”

This certainly has helped grow our business as customers outsource more, but we have had to increase our investment in people, technology and equipment.”

Added Margarone: “You can’t touch a piece of equipment without plugging in a laptop to work on it.”

The company has continued to invest in training to keep up with technological advances, he added.

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Michael Margarone, company president

“In fact, we’ve recently set up a training center within our company,” Margarone said. “We put some training aids and equipment in to train technicians. We’ve even incorporated training in their weekly schedule.”

Where drivers used to have to keep carefully detailed paper logs of their hours of service, now trucks are equipped with electronic logging devices that report that information. That, too, has benefited DeCarolis as businesses choose to lease vehicles and have the lessor deal with new equipment and regulations.

“The trend has been to do a full-service lease, where all the service, maintenance and repairs are on our lap and companies don’t want to own them,” Margarone said. Regulations, both state and federal, also have affected the company and its customers, DeCarolis said.

“Compliance has become much more complex and has added to the cost of operating vehicles,” he explained. “Customers turn to us to make sure they meet all requirements to operate legally and safely.”

What it takes to keep a company like DeCarolis in business for eight decades is its people, he added.

“Where there’s not any business today that if they don’t value their employees they won’t be in business,” DeCarolis said. “It’s having a good team. Everybody’s got different skills and it helps you make better decisions and helps you grow and helps the people grow.”

And longevity doesn’t hurt either. Margarone and the company CFO have been with DeCarolis 30 years, the vice president of sales was hired 27 years ago and the manager of the Buffalo branch has been with the company 15 years.

“We have a group that cares about each other, likes each other and works as a team,” Margarone said. “We don’t have all the answers, but together we’ve got a group that does.”

DeCarolis said the company will continue to grow its core business and look for new opportunities to add value for its customers.

“We will do this by continuing to follow our core values that have made us successful for the past 80 years and adapt and change to meet the ever-changing needs of our customers in the markets we serve,” DeCarolis said.

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