In the driver’s seat
LONG-RUNNING CAR WASH BUSINESS’S NEXT-GENERATION OWNERS EMPHASIZE REINVESTMENT, INNOVATION

ScrubaDub Auto Wash Centers
BUSINESS: Car washes
HEADQUARTERS: Natick
FY 2016 REVENUE: $22.5 million
PRINCIPALS: Bob Paisner, CEO; Danny Paisner, president

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Over a 50-year period, the Paisner family has driven a very successful enterprise with its chain of car washes, known as ScrubaDub Auto Wash Centers. But Danny Paisner, who along with his brother Bob is the second generation leading the Natick-headquartered company, says theirs is a business that goes well beyond simply being a car wash.

“We’re in the business of creating customer experiences,” said Danny, 57. “And those experiences have to do with a set of added value — whether it’s a dog treat for your dog or a sticker for your kid ... It’s not just about having a clean car; it’s about people’s emotions. If you show people that you care about them, they’re much more likely to return.”

Along with that customer-focused orientation, the Paisners have brought a certain shine to this tried-and-true business concept through a strategy of reinvestment and innovation. “Reinvestment is critical,” said Danny, noting the company pours a good portion of the money it makes into such areas as site updates and technology. He serves as president of ScrubaDub, Bob as CEO.

ScrubaDub currently employs about 200 people (150 in Massachusetts alone) across its 18 locations – 13 in Massachusetts, three in Maine, and one each in New Hampshire and Rhode Island. The most recent site is in Chelsea, where the company completely revamped what had been a 29-year-old car wash it acquired in May 2016. Total gross revenue for ScrubaDub came in at $22.5 million for fiscal 2016, up from $19.8 million in fiscal 2015.

Danny estimated ScrubaDub has cleaned more than 40 million vehicles since the first location was opened in Watertown by his parents, Marshall and Elaine Paisner, in 1966. Danny and Bob have owned and operated the business since 1994.

It’s a capital-intensive business, where the cost to launch a new site can range from $3.5 million to $4 million, Danny said. One of the keys to its success as a growing, multisite business, he said, has been to focus on infrastructure – not just people, but systems. “You need to build systems for when things don’t go well and you need to build systems to help things go well,” he said.

The brothers have used technology to create operational efficiencies, such as a corporate intranet for the dissemination of information across all locations and a computerized dashboard that allows the owners and managers to keep track of key metrics within all the sites no matter where they are. They also meet regularly with an outside board of advisers to discuss such matters as marketing and strategy.

On the service side of its business, the company has innovated by offering different types of car wash models. In Woburn, for example, ScrubaDub offers its customers gasoline, a convenience store, a car wash express tunnel, and full-service detailing. ScrubaDub has also developed its own proprietary chemicals, such as its eco-friendly “SuperGlo” soap. And it offers an unlimited membership plan where customers can get their vehicles washed as often as they like for one monthly price. About 21,000 customers are using that plan, Danny said.

“As the business continues to evolve, one primary area of consistency is that it remains a family-owned business — albeit one where its members have distinct roles. For instance, Danny’s focus includes real estate, marketing and banking issues, while Bob’s includes operations, equipment and technology. Meanwhile, Danny’s son Matthew directs new business development and strategic partnerships.

“They’ve got a great product, great operation, and they focus in on the customer experience,” observed Ted Clark, executive director of the Center for Family Business at Northeastern University. “Now you package that up with innovation and the culture that treats their employees well, and their employees build that respect for the business. And that translates out to the customers in a way that’s extraordinarily powerful for a business.”