

Brothers Build A Successful Business From Scratch

Name of business: Express Clean, 500 E. Broadway Ave., Building 5, Clifton Heights, Pa. Phone: (610) 789-8928.

Officers: Chris Viviani and Dave Viviani

Business profile: A joke and a car had a lot to do with the formation of Express Clean, which is located in a Philadelphia suburb. About 18 years ago, Dave Viviani had cracked a joke about when the drycleaner was arriving at his office to pick up clothes that had been left on a coat rack.

Dave and his brother, Chris, laughed at the time, but the seed had been planted to start a pickup and delivery drycleaning service for office buildings. Two weeks later, when they were laid off, they “looked at each other and said, ‘What do you want to do now?’” Chris Viviani recalls. “We said, ‘Let’s try that drycleaning thing.’”

The brothers spent \$300 to create and print flyers and began soliciting office buildings.

“The first office building we went into, we got thrown out; the second office building we went into, we got thrown out,” says Viviani. “So, we retooled our advertising and marketing approach and went back out.”

The brothers found a drycleaner who would clean the clothes on a wholesale basis, but within a year, they had outgrown that facility. At that time, the Vivianis were just picking up and dropping off the clothes.

In the beginning, Viviani says people thought the idea of coming to an office building to pick up clothes for drycleaning was strange. This was several years ago, when pickup and delivery was not such a widespread concept.



Dave and Chris Viviani own Express Clean in Clifton Heights, Pa.

For the first couple of weeks, nobody brought in clothes. But slowly, as customers saw that pickup and delivery could work, they began trusting the brothers more.

“We like the office concept better,” he says. “Whether it’s a four-story building or a nine-story building, I have access to thousands of customers. Now, every one of them is not going to use me, but if I go to your house, I can only get you.”

The business was doing well, so the Vivianis decided to purchase a drop store. They also had outgrown their cars, so they bought two used mail delivery trucks for \$800 apiece to make deliveries. The business just kept growing, and within three years, Express Clean had outgrown the drop store.

The brothers did the math, applied for and received a Small Business Administration loan and opened a drycleaning plant. For about 16 years, business was good, but then the financial crisis hit.

“We did everything we were supposed to do, but everyone’s investments started going down,” Viviani explains.

These days, things have slowed, but Express Clean is running.

“I think we’re fortunate,” he notes. “We’re busy almost every day. Some of it is wholesale – so your dollars aren’t as high – but the machine’s got to keep running.”

Investing in the business: The brothers did not let the economic downturn stop them from moving ahead with their business. They decided to devote more resources to shirt laundry. So, in May, Express Clean moved into a larger plant.

“The only thing we have control over is our business, so during the whole financial crisis, we put our houses up as collateral and took out a loan to move the business [forward],” explains Viviani.

Express Clean was located in a 1,300 square-foot facility. Now, the business is housed in a 3,700 square-foot building with a second drycleaning machine, a double-buck tensioning unit, and two washers and dryers.

“We put everything out there and basically invested in ourselves,” notes Viviani.

The move to the new plant coincided with prom season, so it was a bit hectic at first, he says, especially because it was a new venture and the brothers were learning about the shirt laundry side of the things.

“There’s a learning curve, but I think we’re pretty much through it,” says Viviani.

Express Clean spends a lot of time marketing to customers, he adds. Customers who refer friends receive \$20 off an order through a referral program. The new customer also receives \$20 off his or her first order.



An Express Clean employee

"We get new customers because people share [the recommendation] with their co-workers, which is the name of the game," he says. "If I'm going into your office and I'm getting you, it's not going to cost me any more to get three more orders."

Express Clean also uses a lot of coupons, which many drycleaners have mixed feelings about. But Viviani believes that more customers are really taking advantage of discounts now because of the current economic climate.

While the business focuses on wholesale accounts from office buildings, the brothers say they would like to expand their retail customer base because the profit margin is higher.

"There's a retail void in what's called the Main Line area of Philadelphia that we'd like to capitalize on," notes Viviani.

The brothers understand that growing their business requires a lot of work, which means they are on the road a lot.

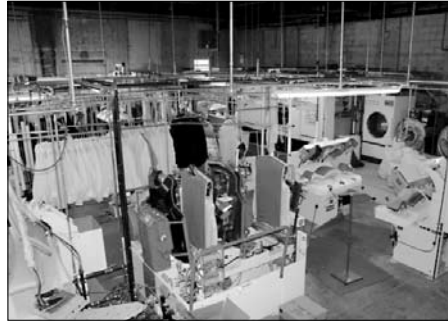
"There's no half-hour, hour break under a tree with a newspaper," says Viviani. "We wear all the hats – we are HR, CFO, IT guy, media director, shirt presser – when need be."

Good growth: Express Clean eventually had to hire a third presser to keep up with demand.

"She's a huge asset, because we can put her wherever we need her," he says. "If we have a heavy shirt day or drycleaning day, she can go back and forth."

The company now includes the three full-time pressers, a plant manager, high school kids for marking in clothes, and Chris and Dave, who are out picking up and delivering each day.

The brothers did not receive any formal drycleaning training. Instead, they learned simply by doing the work. Express Clean uses perchol-



A view of Express Clean's plant

orethylene, although Viviani briefly thought about switching to hydrocarbon. He is not convinced about hydrocarbon's cleaning ability and says he has heard that spotting can be difficult with the solvent.

"In our opinion, perc is faster and it's the most effective solvent," he says. "I think it has gotten a bad rap from before there were actual regulations."

Chris Viviani says he enjoys working with his brother.

"I'm thankful that I have my brother, and I think he feels the same way," he says. "[He's] somebody that you can count on and trust. I wouldn't want anyone else as a partner."

Express Clean used to shut down annually for a weeklong vacation, but this year, the brothers took separate weeks off. Viviani says he really felt his brother's absence when he was gone.

"That week without him made me appreciate him way more than I did," he says.

Learning on the job: The brothers had no prior drycleaning knowledge. However, they got lucky, because the previous owner of the first plant they operated would frequent Express Clean and share his knowledge with them.

"He befriended us, and we befriended him – and he was kind of like my mentor," Viviani says. "He guided us through the whole process, and he hung around a lot – for free. He was retired and he liked our energy."

Viviani says there was a lot of trial and error at the beginning. He also gives credit to the experienced employees for the business' success.

"We're fortunate," he says. "The two main pressers that we have now have been with us for the past 15 years, which is uncommon, I think."

Viviani says he and his brother are always learning and reinventing.

"It's our business but it's not only my way," he says. "If someone has a better way to do something, please, shout it out."

Customer service: Viviani says another reason for Express Clean's success is the focus on customers.

"We're totally customer-service oriented," he says. "I answer every phone call and every e-mail we get. We do our own deliveries. We feel it's more important for us to be out there as the faces of the business, interacting with the customers."

The Viviani brothers are also honest with their customers. They explain to customers how drycleaning is such a hands-on type of business and that mistakes can be made.

"Any drycleaner who tells you he's never damaged a garment trying to get a stain out, or missorted something that never came back – I don't want to call them a liar, but it's not true," notes Viviani.

However, if a customer is not satisfied with something, Express Clean will make every effort to resolve issues.

"We tell people that we're not going let them have a problem," he says.



An employee works with a garment.

"Should something happen, you let us know, and we'll address it. You're not going to get the silent treatment. I think that's paid dividends for us."

Express Clean also focuses on quality.

"Everyone is on inspection here," explains Viviani. "Whether it's the presser, the sorter, the bagger ... I'm looking at as many clothes that I can before I hand it off to the customer. It's not uncommon for us to pull stuff out of the bag because I saw a spot on something that got through." **DCN**