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## Model Cleaners capitalizes on family members' individual talents

Uniform, apparel is firm's fastest-growing segment

Pittsburgh Business Times - by [Maria Guzzo](#)

CHARLEROI -- Jack LaCarte made a lasting impression on his four sons regarding the importance of strength in numbers during a meeting of the family business, **Model Cleaners, Uniforms and Apparel LLC**.

"Dad got out a stick and gave it to my brother Mike, who is the strongest of the bunch," said the eldest LaCarte brother, John. "He said, 'Try to break it.'"

Michael LaCarte was able to break the stick once and then again, turning those two sticks into four. But when it came to breaking the four sticks in half again, he couldn't do it.

"The lesson was if you stick together you can go a lot farther than you can individually," said John LaCarte. "He's always been the person who instills in us the value of sticking together."

Now that the fifth and final LaCarte brother, Danny, 24, has joined the Charleroi-based family-run business, the family ties are even stronger.

"What we're doing now is all about having a family business that supports and helps to keep the family together," John LaCarte said. "Really, that's what it's always been about."

John LaCarte believes what has kept the business running smoothly is the strength of each brother individually, making the whole family business stronger as a result.

John LaCarte, 37, is president of Model, who, along with his brothers and 130 employees, runs nine dry cleaning stores; a uniform lease and laundry division that goes head-to-head with nationally known competitors such as UniFirst and Cintas; and a uniform sales division, which also encompasses an e-commerce arm for clients to choose and order logo-embossed apparel.

"I'm definitely the business leader, the pusher, the driver, the person talking about goals and objectives and what we have to get done," John LaCarte said.

Their father, Jack, however, is still the family leader.

"Any friction and he's the person who takes care of it," John LaCarte said.

Michael, 36, is general manager of Model's dry cleaning operations, with a strength in operations, flow and production efficiency, John LaCarte said.

David, 35, is large accounts sales manager for the firm's uniform rental division.

"He's out there talking to potential clients about what our company is all about," Mr. LaCarte said. "He's a

good outside person, the front person."

Joey, 32, is general manager of uniform rental operations, the firm's largest and most profitable division.

"He had the skill set for that particular position," John LaCarte said. "We didn't just go oldest to youngest when appointing jobs. We've recognized each other's strengths and moved around to different areas of the company until we found the best spot."

The youngest brother, Danny, 24, just came into the business late this summer after having to make a tough decision -- play professional football or join Model cleaners.

Before graduating with a degree in marketing from the University of Pittsburgh, he had been the Panthers' left offensive guard. Although he got a tryout with the Buffalo Bills in June, he didn't get signed.

But even as a brother, Danny LaCarte didn't have a free pass into the family business.

"We had a few heated debates about whether he should join right away," John LaCarte said. "I really wanted him to find experience elsewhere first to make sure it's what he wanted. I really pushed hard, but here he is."

### **INCREASING MUSCLE**

The incident is representative of issues faced by family businesses.

"Just because I'm president doesn't mean it's my way or the highway," John LaCarte said. "It's management by consensus."

Mr. LaCarte said typically the biggest challenge for the firm is communication.

"Sometimes it's taken as a personal attack as opposed to, 'We can do better. We're not hitting our objectives,'" John LaCarte said. "Regular family meetings are a big part of what we have to do to keep everybody on the same page."

The family also developed a management council of 13 people -- the five brothers and eight nonfamily-member company managers -- to set quarterly, yearly and multiple-year goals.

"It brings an outside influence that helps us communicate and makes everybody accountable to beyond the brothers," John LaCarte said. "If someone is not pulling their weight, it's affecting more than just your brother."

He said Model's growth capacity hinges on the family's ability to bring nonfamily members into the management team.

"We have to find the people who will support us in weak areas," John LaCarte said. "We are looking for people who have higher aspirations who don't see the family as a roadblock for them to succeed."

### **BUILDING THE TEAM**

Model began in 1986 after Jack LaCarte purchased a dry cleaning business in Charleroi after hearing about a brother-in-law's success with the same venture elsewhere.

"Two weeks after he bought it he said it was the worst mistake he ever made," John LaCarte said. "He didn't like the business and didn't realize what was involved."

John LaCarte, who had just entered the University of Rochester, said he felt responsible.

"I was in the car with him when he was kicking it around," John LaCarte said. "As a 19-year-old kid I said, 'Yeah, do it.'"

Jack LaCarte kept his day job for RTS Packaging LLC, which makes paper and cardboard partitions. But he also kept the dry cleaner, and during summer breaks, John LaCarte helped out.

"But Charleroi is really a blue-collar industrial area and dry cleaning is not the best fit," John LaCarte said. "That's how we got into the uniform rental business."

He said he was talking to an auto mechanic just down the block who said he contracted with a firm in West Virginia for his uniforms.

"He said he'd buy local if there was somebody closer," John LaCarte said. "And he did."

### **ZEROING IN ON THE WIN**

While the dry cleaning business with nine stores is still the firm's mainstay, other parts are doing well, too, and they're looking at new lines of business such as fire restoration services.

While total company sales were up 17 percent last year over the year before, Model's fastest-growing division is uniform and apparel purchase, which was up 30 percent.

Total company revenue was \$9 million last year and the firm is profitable.

"At different growth stages we saw profits peak and take steps backward," John LaCarte said. But profitability became stable in the late 1990s.

John LaCarte said their five-year plan is to increase sales to \$20 million annually by having 20 to 25 stores.

"We're looking at the Cleveland market for expansion of both dry cleaning and uniform services," he said. "We're looking to become a regional player."

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