



THE POWER OF
PEOPLE

How a Virginia retail business leverages their ‘most valuable commodity – human willpower’ for continued growth

Jennifer Clements is the first to admit she loves to talk. “The gift of gab can be very powerful,” says the co-owner of Pla-Mor Pools, a family-owned retail business with two locations in the Mechanicsville, Virginia-area.

For 40 years, Clements and her husband Kenny have been running the business her in-laws began in 1968 by focusing on the relationships they build with their employees, customers, and industry partners. But Clements never expected her role to become so critical as it did in the last two years as COVID and supply chain shortages combined to make business more challenging.

The pool and hot tub retail business was the hardest hit segment in the industry, Clements surmises.

“We had to put a lot of rules, guidelines, and new practices in place. On the administrative

side, I spent more time making sure that our retail store was compliant than helping customers, and that’s sad,” she says.

Looking back, she recalls the early pandemic days as “horrific” and the time since as a wild ride.

“In all my decades in the industry, I’ve never experienced demand like that,” she says, yet “[suppliers] limited how many tubs we could buy, and we could have sold probably five times as many.”

Pla-Mor weathered the storm, ensuring the next generation of Clements family owners, Jennifer’s four sons, can carry on the tradition.

“I know now that where there’s a will there’s a way,” she reflects. “I think our most valuable commodity is just human willpower.”



Treat employees like family

Clements likes to tease her staff that she has “adopted” them. She says a big part of Pla-Mor’s success through challenging times is in how they recruit and retain employees.

It hasn’t been easy.

“It was the most exhausting feat trying to bring in folks (during the pandemic). I’ve been stunned by how few candidates apply for positions,” she says, citing stimulus checks, safety concerns, and family care responsibilities as culprits. Now she runs continuous hiring campaigns through Indeed, posts fliers, and uses local organizations to educate prospective employees on career opportunities. Her main message: “Your safety is front and center for us, and we value you.”

Other tactics they’ve used the past two years include:

- Aggressively adjusting pay rates to national trends
- Adding short-term sales inducements to products to help create excitement and establish goals
- Allowing employees to help set safety standards
- Including all employees in ongoing training, including leading training sessions once they’ve hit a year of service

Overall, Clements doesn’t try to get fancy with her employee incentives – she focuses on paying employees well and treating them even better.

“Most of our staff has been with us for a long time, so they know they’re part of the family,” she says. “You have to actively work with new staff to establish that sense of belonging.”

Build your network to expand your options

Ask Clements what her job title is, and you’ll get a few answers. She finally settles on “director of business development,” but that doesn’t quite capture the whole picture. She’s used to being behind-the-scenes wearing many hats.

Today she reaches out to other women in this business who feel the same, to help them see the value in talking about their roles.

“Women are networkers by nature,”

she says. “I love to network, whether it’s with other people in the pool business or if it’s with sales reps to find out what the trends are and forecast ahead of time which direction our business needs to go.”

Regardless of gender, Clements says that networking can help anyone’s business grow. She suggests a few key places to make an impact:

- Attending trade shows gives you time to pick the brains of other business owners, get key contacts, and reach out to people with a strong industry presence
- Interacting with political leaders pre-pandemic allowed Clements to contact the Virginia governor’s office in the earliest days of COVID so that Pla-Mor could have a plan in place before restrictions began and keep their doors open
- Joining industry associations like the Pool & Hot Tub Alliance has given Clements the “Batphone” – there’s always someone to call for help, which has especially helped in sourcing hard-to-get products

Communicate with your customers

Clements actively monitors all of her business’s online reviews. Last year, she had a tough one. The customer was lamenting that they had purchased an aboveground pool from someone else, and they couldn’t get a ladder from Pla-Mor. Clements did what she always does – respond with the facts.

“I had to explain the interaction we had in the store that, yes, we did have them on the floor, but they were sold and nobody can source them,” she recalls.

As someone who can talk to anyone, Clements does not shy from customer interactions. Quite the opposite, she’s picked up those communications in the past two years and recommends:

- Getting to know your customer base – Pla-Mor has a large percentage who are older, so they expected elevated safety and cleanliness standards
- Serving customers where and when they want, which for Pla-Mor has meant increasingly moving to online retail and continuing contactless curbside pickup
- Re-evaluating your show floor setup or warehouse storage footage to meet current demands – at Pla-Mor that has meant

utilizing space left open by carrying fewer spas to instead store and display pumps and filters that they stocked up on to fulfill customer needs when others couldn’t

- Providing full transparency into your pricing and sourcing strategies, even going as far as creating a book that shows manufacturer and distributor letters/information on rate increases and product shortages

Clements has learned customers can be fickle. “We were so short on some products and then other products were so far ahead that it would have been nice if we’d had explosive growth on everything.” While not experiencing the growth some builders and service businesses saw, Clements applauds the hard-won 27% growth rate Pla-Mor achieved these past two years, in large part thanks to the people who power their business – their employees, customers, and allies.



With a PHTA membership, I’ve got the Batphone

Jennifer Clements