

Featured Contractor of the Month



Armstrong Sweeping

Kerry Armstrong has had a lot of successes as the co-founder of Armstrong Sweeping in Arvada, CO, but he also likes to point out one of his failures.

"We were going for a municipal project," Armstrong recalled, "and somebody underbid us. And one of the people with that city asked me: 'Armstrong, what are you trying to do — make a profit?'"

Well, yes. Always. Indeed, much of Armstrong's motivation over the past 35 years has been to establish his company as a viable moneymaker worthy of respect from the rest of the business community.

In the process, the 66-year-old Armstrong has rarely missed a trick.

When the North American Power Sweeper Association was formed, Armstrong Sweeping was the first company in the country to receive NAPSA certification. Kerry Armstrong also took a seat on the organization's board.

He has also been slightly ahead of the curve in such industry trends as diversification of services, a stronger emphasis on the environment and the practice of selling equipment before it becomes a burden rather than an asset.

Soon, the 66-year-old Armstrong will step down and let son Mitch take over the business. He has no regrets — none, at least, that he cares to share.

"It's been a good business," he said. "I've had a lot of fun with it."

His story is similar to many in his line of work — a previous job with another construction-related firm, then the realization that sweeping offered an underutilized niche.

"I was with a paving company when I switched over," he said. "I had a couple of friends in the landscaping business, and they told me that there was a real need for someone to do sweeping for apartment complexes and shopping center lots."

That was in 1973. And after a long period of what Armstrong calls "steady, slow growth," the company now has four mechanical broom sweepers, four air sweepers, several water trucks and plenty of accessories.

One of the company's focuses has been keeping its equipment from doing more harm than good.

"Early on, we saw the necessity of the water trucks, keeping the dust down," he said. "That also made our drivers happy, because dust was a problem for a lot of them."

Working for Armstrong is intended to be a tradeoff. The drivers are paid better than the industry average and are encouraged to weigh in on complaints about job conditions. At the same time, they are carefully tracked when they're out in the field, and almost every minute must be accounted for.

"We work on an hourly basis," Armstrong told *Pavement Magazine* in 1999, "and we'll put a note on the bill, usually with



an explanation of some kind, if the job took longer — if the sweeper had to wait for trucks to be moved or something."

Armstrong and his son are regulars at trade shows, and their rolling stock runs the gamut of manufacturers. They're always looking for the best deal, and they treat depreciation of their equipment like a sophisticated game of blackjack — using it to the limit, then folding.

"We sell our equipment when it starts costing too much to maintain," Armstrong said. "There's a good market for used."

Armstrong has always searched for niches, and has never been afraid of tackling big jobs. Two of the company's associations over the years have been Mile High icons — the Denver International Airport and the Denver Broncos' Mile High Stadium.

"We don't do shopping centers much any more," Armstrong said, "because everybody does them."

Underground parking garages weren't as popular (partially because the accumulated oil and grease seepage was so hard to clean), so Armstrong made them a speciality.

"In recent years," he said, "it's finally being recognized how much of an environmental service sweepers do by getting a lot of potential pollutants off the roadways before they can be washed into the water sources. "The green thing. We're very much into that."

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