

EMERGING COMPANY OF THE YEAR:

Alpine Waste & Recycling

Denver business knew its niche from the outset: uncommon service **By David Lewis**

Lots of people lately have accused businesspeople of being motivated by greed.

As far as Alpine Waste & Recycling CEO John Griffith is concerned, at least, they have the prime motivator all wrong.

"It's funny because when people ask me that, I've always said that fear is the best motivator," Griffith says.

Fear has followed Griffith throughout the decade-plus history of Alpine, from its earliest days as a business plan with zero funding to 2011 as a company with about \$25 million in annual revenue.

Regardless of motivation, the ongoing successes of Alpine Waste earned it this year's Association for Corporate Growth-Denver's Emerging Company of the Year Award.

Nobody would blame Griffith for feeling anxiety over the launch of Alpine. The company began in 1999 when he learned he was due to be laid off by BFI Waste Services, a giant trash removal company that has since changed hands several times.

"When your bosses start writing you unsolicited letters of recommendation, that's not a good sign," he notes.

Griffith began by asking, "What else is there for me?" I was about to lose my job, and I started telling everyone I was about to start this, and it got to the point where I would seem like a blowhard if I didn't actually do it. I was a sales manager for BFI, and I knew how to sell the service, but I just didn't know the back end. So I began playing with the numbers."

The number that eventually launched Alpine's stage one was \$700,000, the amount of the private stock Griffith sold for his nascent business.

Not that this success let him off the hook.

"I was concerned I wouldn't get it, but it took only a few weeks; it was a very easy sell. The angels, everybody was somebody I was familiar with, which was nice. That was nice and it's not nice. If you fail, then you're out of friends and family. But if you succeed, then you don't have people breathing down your neck like you might if they were angel investors."

Alpine gained a foothold in the waste disposal industry because of Griffith's ability to hire, and then delegate, and his business' ability to spot niches.

His first hires included Griffith's brother-in-law, now-company CFO Alek Orloff, and Tom Reed, previously a BFI shop manager, now plant manager for Alpine's Altogether Recycling division.

"Alek helped me at the start with the company P&L statements, the financials, and some of those pieces that are not my strong suit," Griffith says. "And Tom was helping me price out trucks. He asked me what I was going to do for a driver. I thought I would just hire a BFI driver. At the time I just figured a trash truck was like a

big Honda Civic — you just hop in and it goes. I didn't realize how much maintenance is involved. I got really lucky because Tom said he wanted to work with me."

The first significant niche, and still the company's hallmark, had to do with exceeding service expectations.

"A lot of little companies try to start up and do what we've done, and the reason we've been successful and others

haven't is that we have found a niche. In any business you have to be the best at something," Griffith says.

"When we started our company the niche was going to be the service end. I remembered people telling me that there was trash on the ground and asking (BFI), 'Would you guys pick it up?' I remember calling operations when I was a sales manager and asking them about it, and their response would be, 'We're not janitors, we're drivers.'"

Training has had a lot to do with winning that niche.

"When people think of a driver in our industry, it conjures up a vision of this kind of surly guy, unkempt and no sleeves maybe, and just an intimidating individual. We always have maintained a staff more like a FedEx driver, or a UPS driver, hats on forward, shirts tucked in, 'Yes, sir, no ma'am,' that sort of thing. We really emphasize that point with our people: When we leave your property it's going to look better than when we drove in."

Alpine has scored a 41 percent annual rate of growth through its first 11 years. This includes 2007, its "best year," Griffith says, when annual sales rose more than 50 percent to about \$9 million.

The company continues to set a yearly target of revenue growth of about \$5 million yearly, Griffith says.

Meantime, managing Alpine has meant the expansion — by a factor of two-thirds — of its Altogether Recycling plant; the recent acquisition of Denver-based Waste Farmers, doubling the capacity of its most profitable new niche, composting; and the successful struggle to open the only privately held landfill in Colorado, the East Regional Landfill near Bennett.

"It's been a very successful venture," Griffith says. "The landfill ensures our long-term viability in this business." ■



Alpine Waste & Recycling
CEO John Griffith