



*Vent-A-Hood*

# CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF **SHADY OAK DISTRIBUTING AND VENT-A-HOOD**

The success story of two multigenerational family businesses



**B**ack in 1969, Lee Guyer had a dream – he longed to own a hardware store. The dream changed when he walked into a small appliance retailer on Shady Oak Road in Hopkins, Minnesota, just outside Minneapolis.

The store was called Vent-A-Hood of the Twin Cities. Lee didn't intend to buy an appliance store, but the phone in this business was ringing off the hook. Inspired, Lee cashed in his life insurance policy, all \$10,000, and bought the store.

Little did he realize that he had just started one of the greatest manufacturer/distributor relationships of all time in the kitchen appliance industry. Fifty years later, Vent-A-Hood is still distributed by what is now Shady Oak Distributing. What makes the story even sweeter is that both companies are still family-run, now in their third and fourth generation of leadership.

As the two companies celebrate their 50-year partnership, the world around them is quickly changing. Two-step distribution – not to mention family-run businesses – seem to be threatened species. So how are both companies still going strong, boldly bucking trends while so many others have caved to modern pressures?

To understand the companies' success, we have to start in the past.

## AN EVOLUTION OF BUSINESSES

Back when Lee Guyer bought his appliance store, it came with a little-noticed perk: the business wasn't just a retailer of Vent-A-Hood products, it had a charter to sell Vent-A-Hood products to other retailers. It was a distribution deal!

But distribution wasn't front and center in those early days. Selling products was. The business had humble beginnings – Lee would run the store in the mornings and personally install ventilation hoods in the afternoons. When his sons Hal and Randy got older, he would leave them to mind the store. As Randy Guyer remembers, "If the business sold a single hood, we'd end the day with a party." Today, by contrast, Shady Oak Distributing sells a Vent-A-Hood every few minutes.

The kids grew and so did the business. At one time, Lee had an appliance retail store, a builder supply company, and a distribution company simultaneously. By the 1980s, Hal and Randy purchased the retail store and Lee sold off the builder-supply business. The constant thread, throughout the years, was Vent-A-Hood.

In 1993, the Vent-A-Hood distribution charter paid off when the entire state of Wisconsin became available for distribution, and Shady Oak jumped at the opportunity. Focusing on expansion, Hal hit the road going state to state, literally tearing out the "kitchen and bath" section of the local yellow pages and cold-calling dealers, seeking to expand the Vent-A-Hood/Shady Oak footprint.

By the early 2000s, the hard work was paying off and the Guyers

sold off the retail store, focusing solely on Shady Oak Distributing. Today, Shady Oak Distributing is the exclusive Vent-A-Hood distributor for seven Midwestern states serving 175 retail locations.

## LESSONS LEARNED: BIGGER ISN'T BETTER

When speaking to the Guyer family, now joined by third-generation leaders LeAnne and Lindsay, two words continually surface: "Passion" and "Loyalty."

To say that Shady Oak Distributing is passionate about Vent-A-Hood products is an understatement. They know every feature and they stock every part for every model ever made. They both have Vent-A-Hood products in their homes.

"Vent-A-Hood is simply the best," said Hal Guyer, President and Owner, Shady Oak Distributing (2nd generation). "It's so superior to any other ventilation product that I feel every home in America should have one."

There is a certain type of loyalty that comes from an intimate manufacturer-distributor-retailer-customer relationship. Shady Oak Distributing represents just a handful of brands, on purpose. They've taken care to choose the few brands they believe are the best, the ones they're passionate about, and to support them as no large-scale distributor ever could. It's a laser-focused, rifle-versus-shotgun approach.

Shady Oak Distributing also handles all warranty service for Vent-A-Hood. This takes a huge burden off the retailers and provides tremendous support for the customers.

"You need a person on the phone who understands your needs and can come to your home and solve any issues," said LeAnne Guyer, VP of sales & marketing, Shady Oak Distributing (3rd generation). "You can't replace knowledge and experience with a price tag."

The loyalty goes both ways. Vent-A-Hood's commitment to Shady Oak Distributing, and the significant investments made to the manufacturing facility over the years to keep up with demand, have helped Shady Oak achieve the level of sales they enjoy today.

Through the multiple family generations the relationship has been "like a marriage," said Randy Guyer, vice president and owner, Shady Oak Distributing (2nd generation). "It's all based on trust and loyalty."

Bill Woodall, regional sales director, Vent-A-Hood (4th generation), concurs: "I see strong similarities between their family and ours. It's a wonderful thing to work with a multigenerational, family-owned company because the level of loyalty, care and passion is unparalleled."

That's a winning formula for a partnership that will continue to thrive well past its first 50 years.

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