

 **Foodservice
Equipment
Support**
general parts group



A Service & Repair

COMPANY



that is **Anything**

BUT GENERAL

As long as machines have been used to automate work, there has always been and will always be a need for someone to fix them when, at some point, they inevitably break down. Back in 1939, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, some skilled repairmen understood that need, and so General Parts Group was founded.



Written by Stacey McCarthy

Initially, General Parts Group focused primarily on domestic appliance warranty and repair work for such items as toasters, blenders, and the first electric shaver, but when a tornado almost destroyed the building in the early 1980s, the company took the opportunity to branch out and leave domestic repairs behind, turning its focus completely to the commercial market.

Over the last 80 years, the company has grown to become one of the largest foodservice equipment support companies in the United States. It has over two hundred field service technicians, offices in twenty-nine locations to serve twenty-six states, more than sixty thousand customers, and annual revenues of over \$65 million. With numbers like these, it is no wonder it is considered the market leader in overall sales in most of the markets it serves. It also ranks in the list of top five independent service companies in the nation. ▶▶





► Its specialty is in repairing food service equipment used for preparatory, cooking or warewashing equipment and commercial appliances like refrigerators as well as heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) equipment. It also offers a full range of other services, including installation, planned maintenance programs and water filtration.

"We have invested heavily in technology, state-of-the-art test kitchens, and technician training centers and have helped raise the standard for the commercial food equipment service industry," said General Parts Group President Gary Schermann.

"I believe a big part of our success has been the quality of our people, our trustworthiness, and our ability to deliver high-quality service," said Schermann. "Our longevity of staff is another reason. People deal with the same people year after year and build relationships. People trust us, and when a customer or manufacturer needs help in a market, they ask us to go, knowing that they will get the support they need from a company they can trust."

"Our handshake means something. Our relationship with you means something."

"Even though our business has gotten bigger, that small company feel is really a part of our fabric, and that's important to me to keep that small company feel where everybody matters the larger we get," he added.

Schermann feels it helps that the company has worked to create a relaxed atmosphere at its offices and focuses on treating people as family and placing value on a work-life balance. Schermann himself started with the company in 1996 when it had only five offices and eighty people. Twenty-six people have been there for more than twenty years, and eighty-eight have been there over ten years.

"Quite an accomplishment, especially considering our recent growth and many new offices with newer employees," said Schermann. "Our goal is to make this the place everyone retires from."

This is exactly what has now happened with former President Bruce Hodge. After fifty years in the industry, mostly with General Parts Group, he had come to be known as an industry legend and has now passed the baton to the next generation.

"Any time a leader with fifty years of experience retires, it leaves big shoes to fill, but having worked with and been mentored ►►



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▶ by him for the last twenty years, I feel like we're in a strong position to continue to build the foundation he set," said Schermann. "Our goals will remain the same, and he and I have similar thought processes on what we want and need to do, but our personalities and approaches are a little different."

Over its eighty years in business, it has always striven to be the best. In 2002, General Parts Group became the first service agency in the United States to meet the highest level of achievement to become the first company to be certified by the Commercial Food Equipment Service Association (CFESA), and many of its technicians hold a CFESA Master Certification designation. Additional certifications that the company holds are from the Manufacturers' Agents Association for the Food Service Industry (MAFSI) and the Restaurant Facility Management Association (RFMA).

It is constantly inventing ways to improve customer interactions. Five years ago, it opened its first national parts distribution center and warehouse so that its customers have quicker access to parts, and has since added another. It also created a web store where parts can be ordered directly. It uses Facebook, Yelp and Google Reviews for feedback, along with sending

post-service surveys. It will even get customers to come in to talk at its annual meeting to discuss the good, the bad and the ugly so it can learn from them.

When at the job site, the technology and data collection methods the company uses enable it to track and analyze equipment service history and the associated operating costs. This has also set it apart from its competitors because it shares the information it collects with its customers, and customers can then use the data to make operating or equipment purchasing decisions. "We are developing more ways to solicit feedback from our customers so that we can always hear our customers' concerns," said Schermann.

"In a time and age when it's less about relationships and more about money and 'what have you done for me lately?' we've really been successful stressing our handshake means something. Our relationship with you means something," he said. "I hope our customers would say that we are a trustworthy partner they can count on to take care of their parts and repair needs."

Like many service companies, it also struggles with the task of finding new technicians due to a huge industry-wide shortage.



“We work with trade schools on a local level. I personally have gone to high schools to talk to kids. We’ve hired a recruiter that will try and source people for us. We advertise the traditional ways, go to career fairs, work with the military. You know it’s kind of turning over every rock to find any qualified candidate,” said Schermann.

“I’m hoping that as more software technology is put into equipment it could [enable a shift] from where the technicians shows up and kneels or lays on the floor to fix the equipment, to where the technician shows up in doctor’s jacket and plugs in his computer to your oven and diagnoses or fixes it. If it trends that way, we may get more people in the IT and technical field.”

In the past three years, the company has been on a continued growth track, including the recent acquisition of DMO Food Equipment Service in Cleveland, Ohio. As it has grown, it has made sure that it has stayed connected to the communities in which it has worked, as these communities have made its success possible. “One of the reasons we have brick and mortar offices in most of the markets we represent is that we do want to be part of the local community and weave into that fabric,” said Schermann.

“We do give a portion of company and each office’s pre-tax profits to a local charity. We also host food drives and fundraisers. Recently, through the Restaurant Facilities Management Association’s RFMA Gives program, we donated our services to help rebuild a Salvation Army kitchen in Phoenix, and just a couple weeks ago, we helped again in Austin, Texas at Mobile Loaves and Fishes.”

It also knows that it is going to have to continually adapt how it delivers its service, as technological advances in smart equipment and robotics are going to have a huge effect. However, this should be easy for a company that has managed to not only endure but thrive under any market condition for over eight decades.

“Our long-term goal is to become a leading national provider of installation, comprehensive repair, maintenance services and replacement parts to the commercial food equipment industry,” said Schermann. “We really are just humbled to have made it eighty years in a tough industry with an ever-changing landscape. It’s a tribute to all our team members – past and present,” he shared.

“We care about our people, and we care about our customers and our manufacturing partners, and that’s what got us to the eighty years, and I think that’s what will keep us around for the next eighty.” ■



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