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# COMMERCIAL

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THE BUSINESS

'S DEALERS

# A Family Affair

The sisters who run Killians carry on a tradition of service excellence handed down through the generations.

# A Family

**The sisters who run Killians take cues from their late father.**

By Mark A. Phillips

The three women who run Killians learned customer service from their father. Elmer Killian drove around the Hickory, N.C., area delivering Christmas bags full of doughnuts, cookies, calendars and pens to his long-term customers. It wasn't just a few customers. It could be more than 80 customers some years.

Susan Kirby says her father would deliver the goody bags for three to four days. "We had people calling in asking if my father was there because they wanted to thank him," Kirby recalls. "We'd tell them he was still out making deliveries."

While it was a small gesture of his appreciation, Elmer Killian's influence rubbed off on his daughters. These days, Susan, her sisters Sharon Killian Radke and Trina Eckard and their mother, Martha, continue to make the deliveries around Christmas. "It's special to us because it's something he started years ago. He was extremely committed to his customers, and he would do the right thing," Sharon says. "I used to tell people if three of us could do half the job he did, we'll be just fine."



Photo by Nathan Arnes

# Affairs



From left, Trina Eckard, Sharon Killian Radke and Susan Kirby operate Killians, a Hickory, N.C., commercial equipment dealership. The dealership was started by their grandfather, Emory Killian.

All photos by Husqvarna unless noted.



**KILLIANS AT A GLANCE****Killians Inc.**

3790 Springs Road  
Hickory, N.C. 28601  
828/256-2167  
www.killiansinc.com

- 14 full-time, six part-time employees, including three full-time technicians
- 10,000-square-foot showroom,  
10,000-square-foot combined parts, hardware, and repair facility
- Revenue breakdown:
  - \$5 million yearly revenue
  - Outdoor power equipment: 50 percent
  - Service: 20 percent
  - Parts, other: 30 percent
- Commercial lines: Husqvarna, Toro and Stihl

It was their grandfather, Emory, who founded Killians in 1953, originally as a feed mill. "There was a point where we actually sold toys," Sharon says. "But power equipment has always been strong."

It's been nine years since their father, Elmer, passed away, and three of the family's five daughters run the business. Now Killians is a diversified dealership, drawing in about \$5 million a year by serving both commercial customers and consumers who buy commercial equipment. Servicing municipal accounts and educating technical and high school students about the industry are just some of the ways Killians maintains its strong connections to the Hickory community.

As a third-generation business, Killians is becoming a rarity. According to *Commercial Dealer's* State of the Industry research, 31 percent of all dealerships are oper-

ated by second-generations, while only 8.5 percent are third-generation. Once the fourth-generation comes around, only one-half of 1 percent operate a commercial dealership.

Killians wasn't always a one-location business. At one point, there were three locations. But the size and resources those stores required became too much of a drain. "I'll never forget, my father said he worked harder and probably made less money," Sharon says. "We found, for us, it's worked better to have one, centralized location."

That's not to say Killians is small. The total facility is 20,000 square feet, with 10,000 square feet each going to the showroom and the combined parts, hardware, and repair facility.

Sharon admits it's enjoyable to watch a business grow and expand. "The hard part is staying there, because everybody wants to take you down and you've got to have the people to run a larger outfit," she says. "Sometimes by just growing, it may look good at first, but to maintain it with the same integrity that you built that business is extremely difficult. That's been my main challenge over the past 10 years, to keep the integrity of Killians the same as it's always been."

The duties of running the dealership have been divvied up among the sisters, based on their skill sets. Sharon is in charge of buying and sales; Susan handles all accounts payable and receivable; and Trina is in charge of marketing, advertising and human resources. "We all make major decisions together, but then we make a lot of daily decisions on our own," Susan says.

**WORKING IN THE COMMUNITY**

Killians, like many dealerships around the country, faces the battle of attracting and keeping qualified technicians. "With such a lack of technicians out there, we're helping to educate a lot of high school students who don't necessarily want to go to college," Sharon says. "The last 10 years have been really tough finding the quality technicians. We've all been through our share, and it's been a nightmare. They have plenty of opportunities for growth and education and we encourage that."

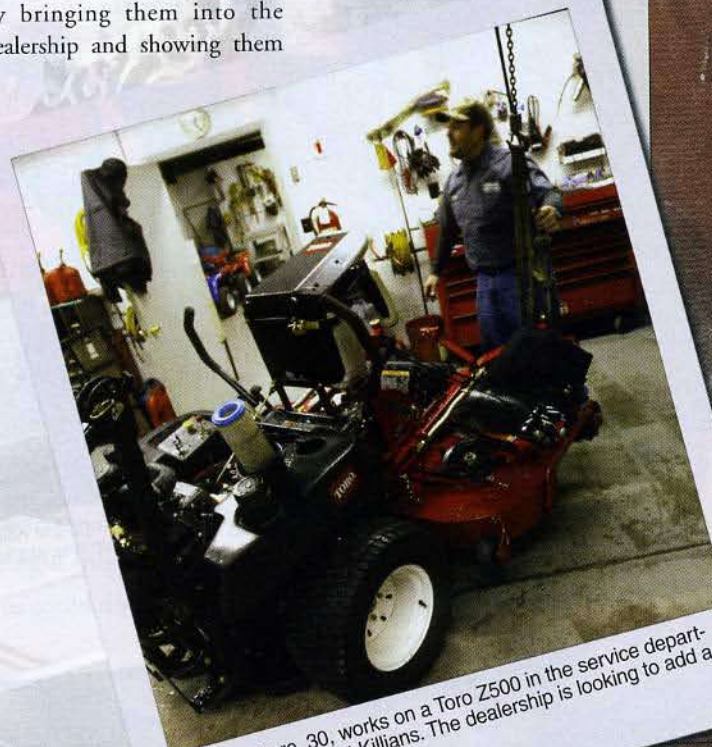
To show this, Killians partners with Catawba Valley Community College and Bunker Hill High School to energize students about the industry and opportunities that exist in dealerships. "Within the last five years, we've all had such a tough time getting technicians or people interested in becoming technicians. It is a huge problem. But for us here, we're able to show people that we have good pay, great benefits. And there's plenty of security."

Besides mentoring students by bringing them into the dealership and showing them

real-world experience, Killians, with the help of manufacturers such as Husqvarna, Stihl and Toro, provides equipment to the schools for use in instruction. "They've all been instrumental in trying to educate the younger generation about the security of our industry," Sharon says. "That's been very good for us and the community." In addition, Killians conducts safety seminars for Hickory employees who use commercial outdoor power equipment on the job.

Killians also furnishes equipment to a children's home and the local YMCA. "We have a really strong YMCA that is very supportive of the community," Sharon says. "It's been really good for us and works well." Killians also donates equipment to about 20 non-profit organizations around Hickory and supports athletic programs with equipment. The athletic programs supply some advertising for Killians, which helps strengthen the dealership's visibility in the community.

Killians, with its location near the Blue Ridge Mountains



David Schere, 30, works on a Toro Z500 in the service department's repair bay at Killians. The dealership is looking to add a drive-through repair service.

Photo by Nathan Armes

and close to Charlotte, is easily reached via Interstate 40. The dealership can afford to be diversified because it's more rural and some customers have to drive long distances to get what they need. "We have customers who drive 30 minutes," Sharon says. Killians' ability to compete with other commercial dealerships isn't diminished by the fact that they don't concentrate solely on commercial outdoor power equipment.

### SERVICING COMMERCIAL CONTRACTORS

Keeping contractors up and running is paramount to Killians, and commercial customers are offered blade sharpening while they wait, but the wait isn't long. "We have four or five people who are very capable of sharpening

blades," Sharon says. "So if we have somebody that needs blades right away, they're sharpened immediately, whether it's for a chain saw or a mower."

If a repair can't be completed quickly, contractors are given a replacement until the work is completed. Killians has maintained much of the equipment for Hickory the past 10 years, even though the city has its own service department. "We do their service work because we are less expensive because we are able to get the equipment out so much faster," Sharon says. "We have a tremendous amount of business accounts — whether its landscapers or municipalities," she says. "We have quite a few country clubs and golf courses that buy from us and are in and out of here every day for parts."



Dave Sanford, 51, service manager at Killians, works on a Husqvarna LZ 5225 in the repair bay.

Photo by Nathan Armes

The dealership also services and sells equipment to other municipalities and organizations, such as churches. An ever-increasing segment of business is coming from homeowners who prefer commercial-grade equipment, especially mowers. "Some people

have a lot of property," Sharon says. "Large acreage is very common here, so we have people who depend on commercial equipment. We sell a lot of commercial equipment to homeowners and they get the same warranty and the same customer service that

our commercial accounts do."

Rather than offering its customers financing from a far-off bank, Killians has worked with a local finance company for the past 20 years. The dealership offers six months, same as cash, and also offers 12 months same as cash, depending on the equipment. Free delivery rounds out the list of services.

While it might seem unbelievable, Sharon says employees of Big Box stores often refer customers to Killians even though they compete on many products. "They've never been strong with commercial," Sharon says. "They've tried it and they've attempted it, but it just doesn't work. They'll actually send people to our facility." Sharon says she feels "competition" from Big Box stores isn't much competition at

all. "If anything, they've gotten weaker," she says. There's no consistency in the product lines they carry, she says.

To sell equipment based on its merits and not on pressure, salespeople at Killians aren't paid on commission. "I tell prospective salespeople that they'll get to tell the truth," Sharon says, because there's no commission influencing the sale. "It's a unique experience to come here and be educated on what you're buying and walk out of here feeling good."

### COMING HOME

For Sharon, it took a move to Atlanta for her to realize how much she appreciated Hickory and Killians. "I've been fortunate enough to have been raised in the business," she says. "And I

missed it." After spending five years in Georgia working for a telecom company, she returned in 1983. "It was really good for me to experience something else," Sharon says. "When you grow up in a small town, you always think you want to live in a large town."

Being so close to the dealership growing up has paid dividends. "I feel fortunate, as the oldest, that I got to spend more time with my father," Sharon says. "I also enjoy outdoor power equipment, used all types of it and grew up with it. I have a passion for it."

Sharon, who has two daughters in college, encourages them to have a passion for whatever career they pursue. "If you really care about what you do, you'd better enjoy what you do and

we do," she says. "I have great people working with me and I couldn't do it without the great staff we have."

For the future, Killians is looking to create new services to garner commercial dollars. The dealership is looking to build a drive-through service center, Sharon says. "It's something that we're working diligently on now," she says. "We'll let them drive through, give them the basic services, and drive on out."

Once the drive-through service center is in place, Sharon says she knows it will have been the right decision. "One of the last things my father said to me was that nobody can make you make a decision today," she says. "If you don't know what to do, sometimes you're not supposed to do anything." 