

Member Profile

TOWNE PARK— Driven to Serve

By Denise Gable

“Jerry South cultivated his work ethic on the farm, forged his training concepts in the military, and discovered a business in the hotel valet parking niche. Hard work, structure and vision enabled him to create a company, Towne Park Ltd., and have made him a successful and innovative entrepreneur. A healthy dose of persistence didn’t hurt either. With South, focus is an understatement. He is a goal-seeking missile.”

– *PARKING* magazine profile, February 1999



Towne Park employees at The Westin, Annapolis, Md.

Even though those words were written 11 years ago, they could easily be repeated today. It is that ability to focus on the task at hand, while never losing site of the big picture, that has allowed Jerry South and the company he founded more than 20 years ago—Towne Park—to grow from a handful of accounts in the Annapolis/Washington, D.C. area to a national leader of hotel and healthcare hospitality staffing and parking solutions.

In October 2008, Towne Park announced the acquisition of Denver’s Mile Hi Valet Services in a move that brought the company a coast-to-coast presence.

“This merger is a key step toward our goal of providing best-in-class service to the national hotel community,” said South at the time. “In addition to the clear strategic benefits of uniting two highly complementary organizations, this move positions Towne Park as a new kind of industry leader—one founded on exceeding guest expectations through employee empowerment and industry innovation.”

But he wasn't finished. In June 2009, the company acquired Avascend Healthcare Hospitality of Overland Park, Kansas, broadening its base into the health care industry.

With these acquisitions, Towne Park decided that it was a perfect time to rebrand the company to reflect its broader mission, says Suzanne Reese, director of communications.

"We launched the new look and logo at our Leadership Summit in January 2010 in Nashville, and the new Website was launched at the end of April," Reese said.

The company's new "anthem"—"Driven to serve" fits its people-first philosophy perfectly, Reese says, but also reflects a broader foundation.

"Our foundation is still about people," she says. "It's not just about the cars, or access revenue control equipment; it's not just about all the metrics and financial innovation we've brought to our clients. It's still about our people. 'The very best people guaranteed' is still part of our philosophy but we are much more now. The new anthem is more encompassing of all that we do and our three values:

- People—if you don't have good people they will not deliver your results no matter how great your processes are.

- Processes—are everything, technology, accounting systems, metrics, key indicators, all of the processes that are key to what we do.
- Passion—reflects our philosophy of service and our desire to serve our clients.

Driven to serve brings all of that together."

If You Can Measure It, You Can Manage It

President and COO Dave Nichols was a hotel manager "with a parking issue" when he became aware of Jerry South. That was back in 1996.

"Somebody told me about his guy," Nichols said. At the time, Towne Park had maybe 20-25 accounts. The company did a great job at my hotel and Jerry and I developed a friendship. When the hotel was sold in 1998, Jerry asked if I wanted to join his team."

Together, they developed what Nichols calls a "game plan for the long-term," the result of which has become more than 300 accounts in more than 50 markets coast-to-coast, with almost 7,000 employees and "growing fast," Nichols said.

How fast? South claims the company has grown 22 percent or more every year since it was founded.



THE TOWNE PARK STORY

One day in 1987, Jerry South went to the mall, bought 10 green windbreakers, and enlisted 10 friends to park cars for opening night at the new Annapolis Hotel (now known as the Loews Annapolis Hotel). South was vying for a chance to run the hotel's parking service as a way to earn money for college. The hotel owner, impressed with South's professionalism, hired him on the spot.

Shortly after, South acquired the Annapolis Waterfront Marriott as his second client. By 1992, his parking service was the only game in town. South cultivated his work ethic on the farm, forged his training concepts in the military, and discovered his business in hotel valet parking. Hard work, structure, and vision enabled him to create Towne Park, Ltd., earning him a reputation as a successful and innovative entrepreneur.

"Every day I learn," South said. "That's the beauty of it. You must use each and every day as a lesson for tomorrow because you'll need it."

So What's Their Secret?

Towne Park measures just about everything. "If you can measure it, you can manage it," says Nichols.

Properties are evaluated using several key critical indicators that are monitored based on benchmarks, he says. "The objective is to improve all aspects of our operations, from service delivery, to financial goals, to customer satisfaction, to employee turnover."

Culture of Continual Innovation

The culture of the company started with Jerry South, says Nichols, with his systemized process of finding great people and giving them a chance to grow.

"The company has always been rapidly expanding. People want to be a part of that," Nichols says. "Jerry has always had this vision that you can be more than you have ever thought about. We have a tight-knit culture built around taking care of people; we differentiate ourselves that way. Our people have a different look to them. With Jerry's military background, he wanted our valets to have a sharp appearance."

Maintaining those precise processes and consistency across 300 locations is a challenge. Nichols was asked—with the company's rapid expansion, how do you not lose that?

"Our culture and our level of service is probably stronger than it was five years ago," he says. "Our philosophy is all about delegating responsibility and authority to our account managers. They are successful if supported properly and understand how to capitalize on opportunity. They take it very personally. We spend a lot of time focusing on those people."

"I spent most of my time trying to figure out how to build an organization of people who are supportive of big systems, hiring, financial management, etc., that allow them to do their jobs. Our account managers run their whole business—

they manage the revenue stream, and establish and develop relationships with the hotels. They are there every day. Our success is in our ability to support those people."

Part of what makes the company unique is its local infrastructure. When it enters a market, Towne Park focuses on developing a cluster of contracts to support one another. Having multiple contracts in a given market creates a seasoned, professional and hospitality trained labor force that allows the company to staff up for high volume functions. In addition, the company forms a district support team comprised of a district manager, human resources manager, talent recruiter and business planning and analysis representative.

"They're never left on their own or feel like they are left on their own," says Nichols.

Only the Very Best People

Nichols says the company's ability to recruit top people is another key to success. They use an automated online application system developed by an occupational psychologist that screens applicants to determine whether they are service oriented, team oriented and safety oriented.

"By the time they finish the application, we can tell if they are people who like to work with other people, if they will work safely, and if they will go out of their way to provide service to others," says Nichols. "This way, we don't waste time interviewing anyone who has not been prequalified and already determined to be a candidate."

"Where does Towne Park find all of these great people?" is a question expressed often by our clients and customers," says Nichols. "Our philosophy is to hold out for only the very best people and then provide for them opportunities to grow and learn. Our selection process helps us to properly screen out those candidates that do not meet our profile."



Jerry's dog and Top Valet "Parker."

"As for the future, South has a game plan—one he is understandably keeping close to the vest."

Training, Training and More Training

From orientation through senior level executive development programs, there is a clear path on how employees can advance through the company. Each new hire is enrolled in Towne Park University, with a curriculum that begins with orientation and is followed by specific training for all entry-level positions. Guest service, safety, loss prevention, diversity and many more training opportunities are available and most often required for every associate.

Off-to-the-Right-Start is a comprehensive orientation and onboarding program for all Towne Park new hires.

“Here they get exposed to all of the things that they would be exposed to on the job,” says Nichols. “If we can get somebody through 90 days, they will be with us for a long time, since the majority of turnover happens in first 90 days. In addition to understanding their daily job functions, it’s important for them to understand how their duties fit into the greater context of our culture and the unique performance standards of each client’s brand and market.”

On a recent tour of the company’s headquarters in Annapolis, Md., Nichols points out the Learning Center, where employees are trained. Since the acquisitions, Towne Park has brought in 200 managers from the newly-acquired companies, he said. They spent three days at company headquarters being taught by senior leadership, receiving an education that will serve them well and make them better business leaders, regardless of their future career path.

Passing the Baton—Herb Citrin and the Red Convertible

South recalls attending an NPA convention in 1992 in Los Angeles that turned out to be a turning point for him both personally and professionally.

“It was at an interesting point in the evolution of our business,” he says. “I was trying to find a path forward for the future of my company. I remember being at the Century Plaza Hotel, and Herb Citrin (founder of Valet Parking Service and considered to be the godfather of valet parking) pulled up in front of the hotel in a red convertible, dressed to the nines, with his beautiful wife. I was young kid at the time, and I remember thinking ... who is that guy?”

“I was told, ‘That’s Herb Citrin, the founder of valet parking.’ It was that moment in time, and that interaction with Herb that motivated and inspired me—his demeanor, his car, his appearance; he had a savvy about him. I made up my mind: ‘I’m going to be in valet parking.’”

A lot has happened since then. At a 2009 meeting of the National Valet Parking Association, the baton was informally but officially passed, South says. “Herb made a comment that has stuck with me. He said, ‘I’ve known you 15 years. You are now the world’s largest valet parking operator. It’s time you became the father of valet parking.’”

With all of his success, South was asked how he holds on that guy buying the green windbreakers in 1987, vying for a chance to run the Annapolis Hotel’s parking operations.

“I’m a philosophical kind of guy,” says South. “I have a lot of philosophies by which I live. One of them is that you can’t be afraid to hire people smarter than you. We’ve done a good job of creating an organization that attracts talented people. I’m always amazed at quality of talent we’ve managed to amass in this organization.”

“You stay grounded every time you get fired by a company. We’re only as good as our last big event; our last 600-person black tie arrival; our last 1500-person departure. When the event ends, the emcee thanks everyone for coming, and 800 people get up and walk outside with their tickets in the air—that’s how we can measure how well we are doing.”

As for the future, South has a game plan—one he is understandably keeping close to the vest.

“There is still plenty of growth potential in the hotel/healthcare sectors; not to say we’re not examining other sectors of the business,” says South. “But we are on a pretty clear path to double our company in next three years.”

Competitors—don’t say you weren’t warned. ↩

