

JOEL LITMAN TEXAS RECYCLING/SURPLUS (DALLAS)

How did you enter the scrap business? My father, Stan, bought a small scrap paper and rag business in 1980, when he was 52. After managing the company on his own for four years, he reached a point where he needed another person to help take the company to the next level. I was working for a public relations and ad agency in Dallas when he asked if I had any interest in joining him. I knew the work culture would be different from the corporate world of an ad agency, as would the opportunities to grow and eventually own the business. To help me decide, I took a week's vacation from my job and worked at the scrap plant. I quickly realized it was a tremendous opportunity. I joined my dad three weeks later, and I've never looked back.

Did you ever regret leaving communications? No, even though journalism had been my career dream for years. From fifth grade onward, my goals were to graduate from the University of Missouri School of Journalism and write for a daily newspaper. I accomplished both goals, becoming a sports writer for the *Times and Record News* in Wichita Falls, Texas, after graduation. Then I worked for the Dallas-based public relations and ad agency. I was vice president—account service manager for several clients, including motion picture companies. Though I loved it, the chance to work with my father and the opportunity to own a business one day were too much to resist, so I switched careers.

What do you like most about the scrap industry? The industry directly contributes to the greater good, such as helping the environment and conserving natural resources. I also like the scrap industry's low-key culture. I haven't worn a coat and tie to work since I left my previous job more than 25 years ago. Plus, our customers are diverse. When buying scrap, I interact with everyone from the CEO to the individuals who deliver paper and cans in shopping carts at our buy-back center.

What do you like least about the industry? Every industry and profession has its warts and headaches. If you believe any profession is hassle-free,

you're fooling yourself. The challenge is to accept your industry's shortcomings and learn to handle them to the best of your ability. You'll then ride that success to the top.

What are the biggest challenges facing your company? My brother Craig and I, co-owners of our company, and our late father, Stan, always worked to be as personable and professional as possible to our customers, employees, and vendors. As our company grows, we want all of our employees to embrace that same philosophy. We believe that's what differentiates our company and makes us successful. Other challenges include establishing revenue streams beyond traditional scrap processing—we also own a document destruction company (Action Shred of Texas), for example—and managing our growth strategically.

How would you sum up your business philosophy? Craig and I embrace the School of Hard Knocks/KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) philosophy. The day-to-day grind is filled with minutiae, so this philosophy keeps us focused and looking forward. We are hands-on to the extent that we can be. People actually answer the phones at our company, and everyone works consistently to get face time and shake hands with all of our customers.

What are the keys to success in the scrap industry? Trust, fairness, commitment, communication, reliability, and creativity. Have eyes in the back of your head, possess street smarts, and surround yourself with strong associates.

What lessons have you learned about business in your career? First, have short-term and long-term goals and execute them. Also, realize that business and life are balanced. When there are great days, don't get too excited because they don't last forever; and when you have not-so-great days, don't get too frustrated because those don't last forever, either. I've also learned not to burn bridges because you may need to cross them again someday.

What has been the funniest experience in your career? Occasionally, customers say they remember when I worked at our plant as a youngster, even though I started in the business when I was 29. I don't want to spoil



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One on One

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their excitement, so I simply say how happy I am that they remember me.

What are some of your greatest personal achievements? At the top of the list, I've been married to my wife, Susie, for 32 years and have two wonderful daughters, Hillary and Carly. Also, I treasured the opportunity to work with my dad—a great salesman, teacher, and motivator—just as I've enjoyed working with my brother and best friend, Craig, for more than 20 years. He joined our family's scrap company after a career as a CPA in Dallas. I'm also proud of my service to the Jewish Family Service of Dallas, the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies, and ISRI's Paper Stock Industries Chapter. Other notable personal achievements include finishing four marathons and countless half-marathons and becoming an Eagle Scout.

Which of your traits do you like the most? My sense of humor, integrity, writing skills, street smarts, and ability to handle tight deadline pressure.

Tell me something about yourself that would surprise people. I'm superstitious about wearing red clothing. I also sometimes order dessert as an appetizer for dinner.

How do you personally gauge success? Money is the easy answer, but I think success also includes being active, in good health, and respected at home, at work, and in your community. Having a happy wife and happy daughters is another measure of success for me.

You've been a great supporter of and participant in ISRI and the PSI Chapter over the years. Why do you think that's so important? Both offer tremendous exposure to the scrap industry. They're conduits to the industry's trends and leaders. The organization represents strength when issues challenge us because members around

the country have a say in how that issue is attacked. And if you need assistance, you can call on a member anywhere, tell them you're an ISRI member, and have instant credibility.

Favorite movie? *That Thing You Do* with Tom Hanks.

Favorite food? A dish of grilled shrimp and green chile grits at Eastside Café in Austin, Texas.

Favorite drink? A chocolate malt.

Favorite cities in the world? Dallas, because I live there. Paris is my favorite city to visit. Colorado, Hawaii, and Mexico are other favorite destinations.

Favorite TV shows? *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Gong Show*.

What are your passions? Family, running, skiing, and the University of Missouri (I bleed black and gold—MIZ-ZOU!).

What constitutes a perfect day for you? Being at the top of a ski run early in the morning on a “bluebird day,” ready to make the first tracks in fresh powder.

If you had three wishes, what would you ask for (other than additional wishes)? To become fluent in Spanish and French (I count this as one wish), become more computer literate, and complete the Western States 100 Endurance Run, a 100-mile run in northern California.

Is there anything you still want to accomplish in your career? I want to continue to grow and strengthen our company to achieve our goals, be a leader in our association, and an ambassador for our industry.

Do you have any advice for the next scrap generation? Be flexible, nimble, open-minded, and street-smart. And read business and trade publications—they're great sources of knowledge and information. ■