

American Auto Wash Kan do

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SPRINGFIELD — After going from a single car wash location to a multi-million-dollar company with several facilities, many people would question a drastic change in direction.

Kevin Kan, however, didn't hesitate to shake things up at American Auto Wash Inc., when he took the reins of the family owned business from father-in-law Reinhardt "Ron" Bets in 2003.

Despite its survival for more than three decades, Kan was poised to squeeze more out of the Malvern-based company, which operated 14 gas stations and 16 car washes in the Greater Philadelphia area when he took over.

"The real challenge is how to take a family-run company, which is already a decent-sized company, and bring it to the next step," said the 35-year-old Hong Kong native.

As a former vice president with financial services giant AIG, Kan was determined to instill a corporate discipline at American Auto Wash, and require accountability from his 200-plus employees.

To that end, he now meets weekly with his district managers — who each oversee about four locations — to get a report on revenue, employee behavior and any problems.

He has also given managers an incentive to thrive by introducing performance bonuses.

"I expect a lot from myself, but I also ask a lot from my people," Kan said, admitting he can be characterized as "extremely tough." "It is certainly a challenge, because when you take over a family-run business (that's existed) for 35 years, it is extremely difficult to change course because you have people (who) have been there for many years, you have a lot of family members."

Since 2003, the company has swelled to more than 300 employees, and revenue has increased from roughly \$40 million to nearly \$60 million, Kan said. He attributed the added revenue to four new gas stations and four



Times staff / PAULA E. DOYLE

Kevin Kan, CEO of American Auto Wash Inc., stands in front of his Baltimore Pike location, one of 16 car washes he acquired from his father-in-law in 2003.

new car-wash locations.

American Auto Wash has also gone from a retailer of British Petroleum/Amoco to a local distributor, Kan said, in addition to its Mobil stations.

Another important change the company has made, thanks to Kan, is the adoption of the brand name Gentle Touch Car Wash to help customers identify its locations. The endearing lamb on the company's logo can be found at each site, including the five in Delaware County, signifying the company's use of lamb's cloth.

"He's a young guy with new ideas, and I hope he continues what he's doing," Bets said about his son-in-law. "We have grown every year and, of course, we also hope to grow in the future." Bets, 77, who sits on the company's board of directors, noted that business has become a lot more com-

petitive than when he started in 1969. Bets noted that at the time, a car wash cost about 99 cents and a gallon of gas was about 69 cents.

American Auto Wash will also launch its own gasoline brand, Griffin Petroleum, later this year, Kan said, adding that the location on Baltimore Pike in Springfield will be the first location to offer the cheaper gasoline.

"I think the success with the company is the best justification of the changes I try to make," explained Kan, a Chester Springs resident.

Kan said he hopes Griffin will become a major regional player in the gasoline market, and perhaps, one day, become a national brand. Melinda Gaspero, manager of the Gentle Touch in Springfield, has worked for the business since 2001. So far, she said, the changes have been uplifting. "They run it well — real well."