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APRO's new president, Lyn Leach, envisions rent-to-own as one big, happy, politically active industry

A conversation with Lyn Leach is, generally speaking, a talk with a measured Midwesterner. This Nebraska native's answers tend to be straightforward yet thoughtful, at times even deliberative. Yet ask Leach to pinpoint his single greatest professional achievement and he doesn't miss a beat.

"Easy," he says, without a hint of hesitation. "In 2001, I was given the industry's highest honor when APRO named me Rental Dealer of the Year.

"There's no question that was my proudest moment in the industry," says Leach. "It's recognition from your peers that you're making a difference in the industry. It demonstrates you're doing business right, you're doing the right things for your clients and fellow workers, and it acknowledges your involvement in the big picture. To get an award like that from an industry as great as this one is, frankly, humbling and a little overwhelming."

For Leach, it was a moment rooted in family. It was a family member who introduced him to the rental-purchase industry and now it was his extended RTO family who were applauding him as the best among them.

IT'S ALL IN THE **Family**

**A PROFILE BY KRISTEN CARD
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID OMER**

FAMILY IS A CONCEPT THAT SEEMS to be reflected in every facet of Leach's life, both personally and professionally. Leach was just a teenager when he began working with his father, a furniture and appliance retailer, performing a vast variety of tasks, from delivery-truck driving to store management. But when Leach graduated from the University of Nebraska and began seriously considering his future career path, his father surprised him by directing him away from the family business—sort of.

“He could see the writing on the wall,” says Leach. “He was watching his competitors close down and knew the independent furniture and appliance retailer was going the way of the dinosaur, becoming extinct. He told me, ‘The wave of the future is rent-to-own. If you want to be involved in furniture, appliances and electronics, the way to do it is to go into the rental-purchase industry, so you don't have to compete against the retail giants.’”

Together, the duo decided to attend APRO's second annual convention in 1982 to see what the rental-purchase industry was all about. What they discovered was a welcoming group of entrepreneurs, eager to share their enthusiasm and best practices. RTO Inc. owner Barry Gambini and brothers Dave and Ron Happe went so far as to invite Leach out to California to learn the ropes first-hand through their business; Leach accepted. When he returned home to Nebraska, Leach was well-prepared to launch his own business. In 1982, he opened up the first Ace Rent-To-Own in Lincoln. And again, family played a vital role.

“My father provided financial help for that first store,” Leach says. “He's retired now, but he stayed with me through the opening of several more stores. If it weren't for him and his foresight and his financial support, this company would not be where it is today.”

A slow, steady growth plan

TODAY, THERE ARE NINE Ace Rent-To-Own stores throughout Nebraska and Iowa—three are managed by Lyn's younger brother, Jeff, and the remaining six stores are owned and run by Lyn; his seventh location is scheduled to open this fall.

Describing the chain's past growth as “slow and steady,” Leach intends to continue that pattern with a long-term plan of opening one new store a year over the next decade. He credits his ability to continue such consistent expansion, despite mounting competition and a sagging economy, to a single factor.

“We have absolutely zero borrowed money,” Leach says. “We've grown on capital and on capital only, and we've not grown until we could afford to do so.”

Leach says the company's lack of loans also provides a competitive advantage. “Because we don't have the over-

“Our company philosophy is real simple: we offer the absolute best customer service in the industry. Seventy-one percent of our business every day is repeat customers. They can see our money's where our mouth is.”

head of borrowed money, we're able to turn a profit on a lower price and pass that savings on to our customers.”

Another unique feature and distinct advantage of Ace over competitors is its “Good News Exchange Program.” The policy provides a 100-percent lifetime exchange guarantee, which lets Ace customers who change their minds about a product transfer the payments they've made to anything else in the store. If they choose to close their account, then they can reactivate it later, using their past paid rent toward paying for a new item.

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Leach. “Seventy-one percent of our business every day is repeat customers. They can see our money's where our mouth is. The ‘Good News’ is, our clients don't lose what they've paid. We go out of our way to make sure in the end they have something to show for their money.”

Doing right by employees and customers

TAKING CARE OF CUSTOMERS IS, of course, only half of the equation. Not surprisingly, Leach adopts an extremely personal, hands-on approach to keeping his staff of about 40 “fellow workers” content. He interviews and hires every employee, conducts reviews, grants raises and promotions and copes with all personnel issues himself. He spends time weekly in each of his stores observing day-to-day activity and occasionally waiting on customers or accepting payments.

“We try to foster a family work environment,” Leach says. “My

employees don't work for me; they work with me. They deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. I consider them my second family.”

Leach works to offer Ace “family members” plenty of opportunities for friendly competition amongst themselves. From Las Vegas jaunts to Caribbean cruises, Leach provides a continuous stream of lavish incentives, but clearly views them as additions to a strong compensatory base.

“You should pay employees as much as you can possibly afford to—more than you think you can afford to,” says Leach. “Whenever I've done that, it has paid dividends. People stay with the company. It makes me feel good about



the company and what it's about. I sleep well at night because I'm not profiting at someone else's expense; I'm profiting along with them. They're family. They're being taken care of along with the corporation."

That carefully fashioned familial feeling is enhanced by the presence of Leach's real family. His wife, Natalie, serves as the company's vice president, managing the home office and the firm's bookkeeping. Leach's two children, Mindy, 15, and Ben, 13, also help with the business as needed, from filing to unpacking lamps to helping orchestrate grand openings.

The Leaches' free time is spent together as well, involved in common interests. With an ancestry rich in ranching, the Leach family spends many weekends training, riding and showing horses; Leach himself frequently competes in team roping events at regional rodeos. The family also raises Longhorn cattle, which they use for roping practice and, eventually, for dinner; in fact, Leach offers his fellow workers quarters of beef at cost.

No stranger to politics

LEACH'S FAMILY-STYLE way of doing business might come across as a modern-day, heartland-of-America fairy-tale, the moral of which goes something like, nice guys do finish first. But don't mistake Leach's solid principles and upbeat outlook for naiveté. He has a firm grip on the issues and challenges facing the RTO industry, as well as a

plan for dealing with them—and it begins on Capitol Hill.

"This is a very, very important time for our industry," Leach says. "We're edging ever-closer to having a federal law protecting rental-purchase dealers and customers [HR 996/S 884, the Consumer Rental-Purchase Agreement Act], and I think it's going to change the landscape of this industry. Our industry isn't safe until we have that legislation. We live with an ever-present fear that somebody could walk into

committee and served as co-chair of the APRO political action committee with colleague Mamie Harper. Their joint objective is to persuade every member and as many of their workers as possible to contribute to the APRO PAC, a first step toward strengthening the industry through political participation.

"Developing political relationships is critical," says Leach. "My relationships with my elected officials has given me such a perspective on the industry and it's paid me tenfold

"What I know about people in this industry is, they're willing to help. All you have to do is ask, and they'll put aside whatever they're doing—even at their own expense—to help do whatever is necessary. As president, I'd like to ask more."

Nebraska or any other dealers' state, change their state law and put them out of business. We can't let that happen. This bill is the first order of business."

Leach is no newcomer to the political side of the industry. He is a former member of APRO's government relations committee, past chairman of the legislative conference committee and personally has gathered six congressional and two senatorial co-sponsors for HR 996/S 884.

Leach also chaired the membership

rewards in my pride of this industry. It's been amazing to me how willing politicians are to help when they see it's the right thing to do. And when they become our allies, it's important for us to become allies of theirs. If you love the industry, then you should take care of it. And this is taking care of it at the highest possible level."

APRO leadership is preparing to develop a new five-year plan and, beyond approval of the Consumer Rental-Purchase Agreement Act, Leach wants to see the RTO industry make significant progress in the areas of public image, state association revitalization and further support for the customers who support APRO dealers.

As past chairman of APRO's ethics committee and a former member of the public relations committee, Leach wants to see the rental-purchase industry's image continue to improve; he believes it begins with each dealer and his or her own personal integrity.

"The best piece of advice I've gotten from my dad is to always conduct myself in a way that I and the rest of the family would be proud of, both personally and professionally," Leach says. "We're all going to make mistakes

There are nine Ace Rent-to-Own stores throughout Nebraska and Iowa.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF LYN LEACH

and if you tell the truth about them and make decisions based upon the best interests of everybody, then you can never get too far off-course."

Leach also would like to advance APRO board member "Tiger" John Cleek's efforts to breathe new life into dormant state associations, with the ultimate goal of establishing a hearty, dynamic industry presence and organization within every state where rental-purchase dealers live and work.

"Most store-level personnel can't be involved in the industry at a national level," says Leach. "But they can be very active at the state level. And the greater involvement they can have in the industry, the greater pride and ownership they'll have, the better they'll run their stores and the better the industry will become."

Additionally, Leach wants to explore ways to give back to the RTO industry's faithful customers. He favors fellow board member Shannon Strunk's idea for an APRO scholarship program.

"I think education and bettering people in their position, giving them an opportunity to apply for a college scholarship that would give them a leg up that they didn't have before is a program I'd like to see initiated and watch rental-purchase customers benefit from," Leach says.

Looking ahead

AT THE END OF THE PROVERBIAL DAY, Leach can't help but return to his family-centered beliefs and values. The legacy he'd most like to leave as APRO president is a broadening of the circle—a commitment to shaping APRO into an association of inclusion.

"I'd like to see APRO grow and include even more people to create even more opportunities for involvement," says Leach. "What I know about people in this industry is that they're willing to help. All you have to do is ask and they'll put aside whatever they're doing—even at their own expense—to help do whatever is necessary. As president, I'd like to ask more. I want to include more people and ask more of them to make our industry an even better one."

So dealers who'd rather reap the

rewards of APRO membership passively or anonymously, beware: You're part of the family and Lyn Leach is about to do a little good old-fashioned bar-raising. And with Leach's pumped-up, hunkered-down, give-and-you'll-receive mentality—along with his sheer exuberance for his profession—he just might lift you over.

"For me, the rental-purchase industry is not just a job, it's not just a career. It's a life," Leach says. "The truth is, I get up every day and throw my hands in the air and say, 'Yes! I'm proud to be in this, I'm fortunate to be in this. I just love what I do.'" ■

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