

## The CleanX-factor: a supply business focusing on personal service and growth

*It was a significant career change for **Graeme Gardener** when he threw in number crunching to open CleanX, a cleaning supply business north of Brisbane. Six years later, the business has withstood the global financial crisis, growth challenges and online price battles, developing a resilience and customer loyalty that, he tells *INCLEAN*, has readied it for the next big phase of change.*

### By Jo Cooper

Step through the doors of CleanX Cleaning Supplies and two things are immediately striking. One is a buzz of activity that complements an efficient and fast-paced operation: a forklift scooting around, delivery trucks arriving, staff on phones taking orders and others handling the needs of walk-in customers. It's clear that here is a team focused on getting the job done.

Just as eye-catching is the stock range: row upon row of neatly displayed and ticketed cleaning supplies, safety equipment and packaging, plus a warehouse filled with paper and bulky goods, giving the competition a run for its money with more than 3000 lines.

"For a mid-range business we certainly do have a wide range of products," noted Gardener, CleanX owner and manager.

This busy 450 sqm site in an industrial area of Brendale, just north of Brisbane, is testament to Gardener's vision for a growing, responsive distributor and wholesaler. It was just six years ago when, after researching the idea of purchasing a cleaning supply business and not finding what he wanted, he instead hired a salesperson and warehouse operator and started CleanX from scratch.

Gardener selected a location easy to access from home and part of a busy hub near a highway with not too much competition. "I bought cartons of paper and bottles of chemicals and went from there," he recalled.

"We were at the end of this street and only there a year. It was a bad location, so we then moved a couple of streets over for three years, and when the lease on that ended we moved here as we needed the extra space."

While growth has been strong, Gardener – formerly an accountant for a software company – admitted it could have all gone very wrong, very quickly.

"We'd only been open six months when the GFC hit," he explained. "I'd just walked out of a very secure job. It hurt us a little bit, but you put everything you have into it, resource wise, and you really can't walk away from it."

"That's when we decided to move to a different location and concentrate on walk-in traffic and it did very well for us. It helped us to grow and get a good presence," he revealed.

Today, the CleanX team numbers eight – five fulltime and three casual staff – in warehouse, external sales and administration. Geographically it mainly services the greater Brisbane area, from Caboolture to Logan and Ipswich, although it does have some customers outside that area and interstate.

General industry, residents, small or large business – all are welcome to purchase from CleanX by phone, in store or online.

"Mums and dads come in and buy in bulk, laundry powder and that sort of thing," Gardener said. "Then we do property services in the city and supply all the hand towels and products for cleaners in offices and high-rise apartments."

The online side of the business was something Gardener was intent on pursuing from the outset. "There was nothing web-based, and that was something I wanted to do – coming from the software side of things I knew there were opportunities to take advantage of."

He was warned when launching online purchasing – and publicising product prices – that CleanX would be undercut and that scenario



From left: Graeme Gardener, Darleen Tume, Darren Hill, Leonie Villegas, Wayne Flack and Ron Lubke

unfortunately eventuated. Regardless, many customers still preferring to phone or visit the premises, and it was important to Gardener that CleanX maintained its online presence.

"I wouldn't go away from it – you've got someone there selling for you 24 hours a day," he stated. "Everyone is slowly moving down that way and some of the competition is doing quite well in that area. We're trying to improve it all the time."

Another element of CleanX that remains solid is its participation in the RapidClean co-operative of more than 40 stores across Australia. This enables its constituent businesses to reap the benefits of combined purchasing power, strategic marketing, product branding and other support. Gardener joined up about four months after opening the doors.

"There's no forced commitment: you don't have to buy any particular product from anybody," he explained. "You just have to buy a minimum dollar value over a year, so it's a great incentive and great help because you're all pooling together. The savings are substantial."

Gardener said he chooses to buy quite a few RapidClean products, including chemicals, wipes, hand towels, guest amenities and dispensers, because the cost savings are matched by good quality. "The association with RapidClean is also a good one because when we can't supply something to a particular area, another RapidClean store can do it instead," he noted.

Going the extra mile for customers is something Gardener takes very seriously: if you place an order before 9am with CleanX, he and his team will do everything they can to ensure it reaches you that same day. "Generally our customers are repeat customers, and once you provide reasonable service at a pretty good price, they tend to hang around quite a while," he shared.

He also has firm plans to stick around in the industry and expand to a number of Brisbane locations in coming years – as well as continuing to win good accounts.

"I'd much rather have accounts we can keep than a contract where someone is tied to us," he admitted. "With a long-term account there's always competitors knocking on their door. So you know you're doing a good job if you can keep that business and keep that relationship going"

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