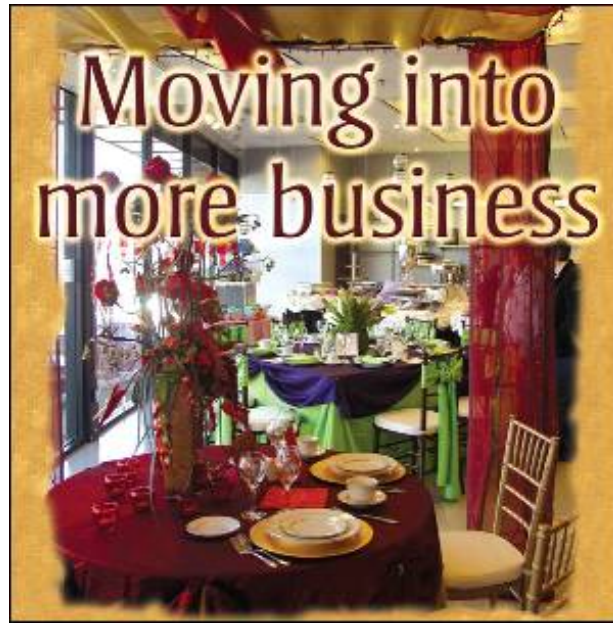




## Moving into more business



### Sustaining and expanding a rental store means focusing on the future

BY WHITNEY CARNAHAN

Whitney Carnahan is features editor for Rental Management, Moline, Ill. She can be reached at (800) 334-2177, ext. 283, or e-mail [whitney.carnahan@ararental.org](mailto:whitney.carnahan@ararental.org).

TLC Rents, a party and event rental business, sits on a busy street in Midtown Atlanta and uses the location to its advantage, filling the glass-walled front with decorated tables in various themes.

"This is a fantastic location for us. We get a lot of walk-ins," says Reuben Ayoub, president of TLC Rents. In addition to the drive-in business, the location of the store gives them better access to Atlanta's events and the size of the building allows for a showroom and warehouse storage on-site.

After combining two party and event rental locations into one building in January 2006, the next step for TLC Rents was to figure out its niche in the market. "I hired an advertising and marketing agency to help us define what that is, to re-brand ourselves and to see if my customers have the same view of my company as I do," he says.

"It's a long-term relationship, most definitely. The agency really got to know the business and the industry. I was very impressed. They went out and interviewed our customers. They rode in our trucks. They interviewed



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CARNAHAN

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significant leaders in the industry. They also did a lot of secret-shopping experiences," he says.

Hearing about the results of research has been an experience, he says. "We're kind of going through that discovery process. It's been extremely interesting and enlightening at the same time. It's also confirmed a lot of things," he says.

Creating a vision of a rental store is one thing when first starting out in business, Ayoub says, adding that it's quite a different task when the business has been open for more than 20 years.

"It just got to a point where my advertising needs were overwhelming. Dealing with trade publications and the Web site is a full-time job. When you're at the level we are, it's extremely important how we market ourselves. I'm not an expert in that," he says.

TLC Rents was started by Lamar Hart in 1986 in Norcross, Ga., and the business grew as Hart targeted special events in the Atlanta area. In 1998, Ayoub, along with Abigail Lignugaris and Jeff Lignugaris, bought the store. In 2004, the group also bought the Atlanta branch of HSS/RentX, formerly Abbey Rents, in Atlanta and then combined the two businesses in the new location.

The front showroom is decorated with themed tables for weddings, Mardi Gras and other events. Displays on the tables are changed every quarter. The other half of the showroom holds displays of serving ware, dishes and linens. The store's three inside rental coordinators are stationed at a desk in the middle.

The inside rental coordinators handle the walk-in service as well as regular customers. "They're constantly answering the phones," Ayoub says. "Their role is customer service and inside sales. I've assigned each of them top-tier customers to develop a relationship with. They are responsible for maintaining that relationship, checking with them on events and letting them know about new products. I do expect them to grow that portfolio. The company has a monthly goal. The company has to reach its goal in order for anybody to be awarded an incentive."

A hall from the showroom leads to the offices and linen storage and then into the warewashing area for dishes and linens. Each linen has a mildew-alert tag, as well as a label with the size and style of each cloth. In the back warehouse, trucks back up to four bays for pick-up and drop-off. Returned equipment is staged, cleaned, bagged and labeled from there. Nearby is storage for tables, tents and chairs.

Most of TLC's business comes from caterers and event planners, as well as banquet facilities, Ayoub says. "I would probably say 50 percent [of our events] come from corporate clients and meetings and I also would lump into that caterers and event planners." The rest, he says, comes from the nonprofit and hotel industries, as well as private events, such as graduations.

TLC Rents also gets involved in city festivals and nonprofit events around Atlanta including the Aid Atlanta's AIDS walk and also events for the organization Joining Hearts, which raises money to provide housing assistance for people living with HIV.

"[Joining Hearts] raises money to benefit an organization called the Jerusalem House, which is an organization dedicated to supporting runaways who are gay or lesbian and don't have anywhere else to go. Usually they have an event every year at Piedmont Park. They basically convert the entire pool area into an outdoor event — dinner, music and dancing. I pretty much donate everything — staging, tenting, tables, chairs, linens, pipe and drape. They raise \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year," he says.

Another event TLC participates in is the Toy Party organized by "For the Kid in

All of Us," an all-volunteer organization in Atlanta.

"Every year in December, the organization collects holiday gifts for children throughout the metro area who wouldn't normally receive any. It has become an enormous event in just a few years. They recently called me and want me to come on board as a sponsor. That usually involves donating staging, tables and chairs and lots of linens. They basically take over the lobby of the Apparel Mart," Ayoub says. Last year, the group collected more than 5,000 gifts in five hours.

Ayoub says he tries to plan the year's charity work in advance and has employees help choose events, as well, although the company does limit the number of events and does not entertain last-minute requests for donations.

In addition to marketing the company and supporting local charities, Ayoub says another way he hopes to promote and grow TLC's business would be working with food-service management companies on college campuses and aligning TLC more with commercial and corporate entities.

"In some cases, that parent company could filter to 100 different opportunities," he says, adding that this effort to build more business has meant selling the rental industry to those companies.

"Actually, I really enjoy that part of the sales approach, because it's challenging, and you have to be really patient and develop the relationships. It's definitely a long-term approach," he says.