

She's Climbed the Ladder at Bader, Now Maureen Lee Is Leading the Way

By Laura Williams-Tracy

The second generation of Bader Company is in place.

Maureen Lee, 39, who was a child growing up in a suburb of Philadelphia when Bob Bader began mass marketing insurance products in 1973, has been picked to lead the employee-owned company after six years learning at the knee of Bader and former president Lawrence Friedman.



A former public policy researcher, Lee brought her inquisitive nature to Bader Company in 2005 and quickly ascended to top management. Bader Company, a leading provider of self storage insurance products with a strong balance sheet, benefitted during the recession from self storage operators pushing tenant insurance programs as an additional revenue stream.

In 2008 Bader, who remains on the board of directors, sold the company to its 60 employees, who expect to wholly own the company ahead of the projected seven-year buyout schedule.

"We are an ESOP company and as such we have a really big belief that if a position comes up we'd like our homegrown staff to have first crack at it," says Ray Sakowski, Bader Company CEO and chairman of the board. "When this opportunity came up we felt like Maureen deserved it. I like to say we've got the second generation of Bader Company in place."

Amy Sobiski, who started with Bader as a claims processor, was named vice president and COO at the same time.

Painted on the walls of Bader Company's Indianapolis offices is a reminder Lee knows employee-owners take

to heart. "Think of yourself as the customer," it reads.

"Obviously we all have a stake in how the company does," Lee says. "It takes a while to comprehend the whole concept of an employee-owned company. There's no big committee voting things together. But I'm trying to reinforce that most of our company really relies on customer service."

Updated Communication

Under Lee's leadership Bader has changed its claims processes to enable personnel or employees to communicate more rapidly with customers. Policies and other communication are now sent by email and fax rather than making customers wait for mail delivery. Claims employees are more likely to call a customer if they need information, rather than simply waiting for the customer to take the next step. And claims employees reach out to storage managers for loss reports as soon as Bader receives the claim.

In interactions with owner-operator customers, Lee has consolidated Bader's sales and marketing departments to ensure communication is consistent and that the insurance agent is reaching out on a consis-

tent basis to single-site or multi-site customers.

"We have people calling every day who have suffered a loss," Lee says. "When someone is upset or angry they want assistance. It's our job to show we are here and are going to process their claim as quickly as possible."

Leveraging new technology, Bader has dramatically cut the amount of time it takes for new customers to receive their certificate of coverage. Instead of waiting for data to be entered, clients are able to electronically submit the relevant insurance information. Within minutes new customers have coverage.

Though Bader has been the leader in storage unit insurance for decades, Lee says there are still growth opportunities among facilities that don't offer tenant insurance programs.

"We went from a small, privately held company, and we've grown really fast," Lee says. "We're trying to make sure we have the appropriate systems in place."

A Quick Learner

Lee began her career at the Hudson Institute, a nonpartisan policy research organization dedicated to

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research to promote global security, prosperity and freedom, based in Indianapolis. During the late '90s, Lee focused on President Bill Clinton's initiative to reform welfare and worked her way to a project manager role.

When the Hudson Institute moved its headquarters to Washington, D.C. to concentrate on foreign policy, Lee and others formed the Sagamore Institute, another Indianapolis-based think tank.

After six years in nonprofits, Lee joined Bader Insurance in 2005, answering an advertisement to be Bob Bader's executive assistant. Lee says she had no idea the move could eventually lead to her becoming president of the company, she was just excited about learning the commercial ropes.

"From the day I stepped into the building I could tell that Bob had built an incredible company, and what's unique about Bader is the ability to grow within it," Lee says.

Lee admits that when she joined Bader Company in 2005, she knew very little about the insurance business.

"I had health insurance," she jokes, "but I like to think I'm a quick learner."

Lee brought her inquisitive nature as a researcher for the Hudson Institute to Bader, and worked to figure out complex issues.

"I'm constantly researching," Lee says. Early on she handled compliance issues and eventually hired Bader's first compliance manager.

"I think Bob recognized that I like to learn new things, and he pushed me to learn new things. I worked in or with various departments to get a

better understanding of the company and the industry."

Bader assigned Lee to special projects, such as streamlining processes. In 2007 she earned her property and casualty agent license.

When Bader retired in 2008 and the company transitioned to an employee-owned ESOP, Lee worked for Freidman, a former Justice Department official, brought in to oversee the transition.

Lee was promoted to vice president and chief operating officer by 2009.

Freidman left in October 2010 after guiding the company through the ESOP transition, and Lee was named as his replacement in May. Friedman and Bader remain members of Bader's board of directors.

"I have a good brain trust to look to when I have questions," Lee says.

Single Mom Makes Good

Lee grew up in Churchville, Pennsylvania, and intended to go to college on the East Coast. But during her senior year her father took a job with drug maker Eli Lilly, which transferred the family to Indianapolis. Lee attended Saint Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana, then transferred to Butler University where she majored in history.

About that time, Lee's daughter, Brynn, now 16, was born. A single mom, Lee says her family rallied around her and her daughter. She returned to school to become a junior high school teacher but after student teaching joined the Hudson Institute at the recommendation of a professor.

"I've always been a single mom, and my daughter, she's a great kid," Lee says. "My parents and my brothers and their wives have helped and I

lived with my parents for a long time. My daughter has a very close relationship with my parents, and they are very supportive and proud of me."

A competitive swimmer during her school years, Lee continues to be an exercise enthusiast, taking kick boxing, spin classes and running at her local gym. She enjoys college and professional football and is an avid Phillies and Colts fan.

Sakowski says Lee's competitive and disciplined approach to sports carries over to her work.

"She's very efficient. She's a pleasant person to work with. She's all business," Sakowski says. "There's no 9 to 5 with Maureen. You are likely to get an email at 10 at night or 5 in the morning. She sets a great example."

Sakowski says Bader Company posted a record year in 2010 and intends to do the same in 2011 with a strong performance in the self storage market as well as new ventures, such as insurance for independently owned ATM machines.

"We've had lots of change in recent years but the founder and past president remain on the board of directors so there's a lot of experience there to support her," Sakowski says.

Bader Company operates in 49 states and continues to grow, doubling employment to 60 in the past six years with plans to hire another three employees before the year is out.

"I love the company Bob's built and the people I work with," Lee says. "I've been given so many opportunities by Bob and Larry. Larry did a great job bringing in people who were a good fit for the company and we have a great management team. As an ESOP, that team is young and has a vested interest in seeing the company grow." ❖