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## LIFE GUARDS

Quad City Safety's  
deep-dive approach  
to selling safety

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# LIFE GUARDS

QUAD CITY SAFETY'S DEEP-DIVE  
APPROACH TO SELLING SAFETY

**S**it down for a minute with Dave White and you find yourself face to face with an evangelist, a true believer in safety and an inexhaustible educator. But you won't be there for just a minute. You'll be there for a while.

Quad City Safety was launched in 1968 by two optometrists who catered to Eastern Iowa's industrial base. With the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970, their business began to add related product categories. Mike W. Smeaton, who had served Quad City Safety as a manufacturer's rep for American Optical, joined the company and eventually bought the business. Then in 2005, he sold out to his son, Mike, and fellow Quad City employee David White.

Today Smeaton and White lead their





**“WE’RE NOT TRYING TO BE A LOGISTICS FULFILLMENT COMPANY, WE’RE TRYING TO BE A SOLUTIONS-DRIVEN PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT PROVIDER.”**

**DAVE WHITE, CFO, QUAD CITY SAFETY**

company of 40 employees and four stores as evangelists of safety for the industrial, renewable energy, elevator and related high-hazard trades from their home store in Davenport.

Last year, Quad City Safety sold into 48 states and six different countries. One customer is based on the East Coast but has more than 200 offices across the country and QCS supplies PPE and safety equipment to each of them. Some industries, such as renewable energy, have roving crews that erect wind towers in remote areas and then move on. Quad City follows them, too.

“The common thread with all of our customers is that they are involved

in high-hazard industries,” White explains. “The more dangerous the working conditions, the more help they need.

“Our purpose is really that safety message and making sure that we understand when we sell somebody something that we are doing our due diligence to understand what they’re doing, what their hazards are and making sure whatever we sell them is the right thing instead of just taking an order. We’re not trying to be a logistics fulfillment company, we’re trying to be a solutions-driven Personal Protective Equipment provider.”

That said, White and his team are open for business to anyone. If a

potential customer walks in off the street, they are welcome to shop. This happens more often than one might think because in addition to its professional lines of fall protection and hand and eye protection, Quad City Safety also is a full service, serious protective footwear store.

“We’ll sell directly to anyone,” White says. “And it can be a weird looking transaction too, because sometimes your employer will say they will pay \$100 toward whatever you want, provided it meets their requirements. So if the customer settles on a \$150 pair of boots, we get \$50 from him, bill the company for \$100 and make sure that whatever he buys meets

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Each brand and model in Quad City Safety's protective footwear store is selected according to its unique safety, fit and performance characteristics, so no matter what your job entails, they have the right footwear for you.

the company's specifications. He may need a boot that is slip-resistant, metatarsal with a defined heel. So we work with him to make sure he buys a product that meets those requirements that he will be comfortable wearing all day.

"We're not just going to sell you a pair of shoes. Every shoe and boot in this store has a story and a purpose. It may meet high-heat specifications or be slip resistant. Maybe its waterproof, or insulated. It may need to be steel, or an alloy. It may need to be an electrostatic dissipative (ESD) boot. The worst thing you could ever do is sell an electrician an ESD boot — he needs an electrical hazard (EH) boot. Many people who walk in here, unless they have a decent amount of training, may not know what they need."

### IF THE SHOE FITS

Quad City Safety's current range of professional footwear spans 16 brands. At first glance, that may not seem like a lot but each brand can offer a couple of dozen or more styles — not counting sizes. In the Davenport store, the footwear section occupies roughly 650 square feet.

"Protective footwear is a really different transaction," White explains. "If I'm going to stock a style of shoe, I have to have 13 pair — at least. And that's not even counting different widths. So typically you want to service it, you're going to have two

widths. So all of a sudden you've got to have 26 pairs of shoes. I haven't sold anything yet, but I've got 26 pairs of shoes. And then not only do you have a 'stick run' of 26 pairs of shoes, but you might want to be a little bit heavier in men's sizes 10, 11 and 12 because the higher service level on those.

"So just putting one pair of shoes into the store is nothing like stocking a vest that I can buy at \$400 per 100 vests. Let's say it's an American made boot and my cost is \$125 per pair. All of a sudden I've got to buy 26 pairs — it's a completely different thought process. And not only that, I'm planning on getting eight or 10 turns a year out of those vests. If I can spin that shoe two and a half, maybe three times in a year, I am killing it."

Distribution is always cycle time, White notes. The success of a company hinges on how well it can turn products while managing operating costs. The faster a company can cycle through inventory, the more profitable it will be. Anything that can decrease cycle time is a valuable tool.

### THE LONG RUN

So to drive sales and increase turns, Quad City Safety makes its footwear get out and run, literally. The company has three dedicated 24-foot mobile footwear trucks; one for steel-toe products, one for metatarsal products and one for a mix of products.

This practice began in 1998 when Quad City Safety acquired Blackhawk Work Boots, an area footwear business which also had a mobile shoe truck. Since then, Quad City Safety has expanded the truck program and finds the vehicles are an excellent way of getting boots on the ground.

### TRA-DIGITAL MARKETING

Led by director of marketing Fred Radunzel and his team, Quad City uses every sales tool it can harness to find, cultivate and serve customers in whatever way they prefer to be reached, whether that is electronically only, in-person, by phone, fax, catalog or a combination of means.

"Figuring out what we're going to sell and how we're going to sell it is a big task," Radunzel says. "So I'm building new digital tools to enhance our traditional sales process, which all gets integrated into the marketing side as well. Plus, because we basically have B2B and B2C businesses and customers, we have to market to them differently."

"So we do TV and radio advertising for our footwear products, which we would never do for everything else that's in our stores," White adds.

In addition to traditional media, the company is growing a YouTube channel with short videos made in-house. Other tools include email marketing

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**“A LOT OF OUR CUSTOMERS PLACE THEIR ORDERS ELECTRONICALLY BUT WE DIDN’T SELL THEM ON THE INTERNET; WE SOLD THEM ON THE PHONE OR IN PERSON.”**

**FRED RADUNZEL, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING, QUAD CITY SAFETY**

campaigns, search engine optimization and related digital efforts, vendor-managed inventory programs, kitting and more.

“And we’re still cold-calling customers on the phone, too,” Radunzel says. “We do it all.”

“It’s a spooky term, ‘tra-digital,’” White says. “Even though you are trying to sell traditionally, you’ve got to mix digital in there. A lot of distributors are not getting the fact that how we sit today is not how we will sit tomorrow.”

Part of this is change driven by technology and part by the younger generations themselves. Quad City Safety has seven outside sales people in the field, but Radunzel observes that the outside sales function has changed in recent years.

“In outside sales, the key word used to be ‘out,’ but customers don’t want you there as much as they historically did,” he says. “Throwing donuts through the door once a week is not how it works anymore. We still

have about three people who spend a majority of their time with customers in the field. Dave, Mike and I and some of our other team members have a lot of other roles but we still call on customers, too.”

“Millennials definitely don’t want to talk to you,” White observes. “Gen Y will be more relationship driven. But in the meantime, millennials are first-line managers now and are coming into procurement and they don’t understand distributors. They think, ‘If I want to buy a 3M product, I should buy it directly from 3M. It’s really difficult to get them to understand the value of a distributor in the transaction.

“You can’t leave any stone unturned — you’ve got to make yourself sticky,” White adds. “And for each customer, that’s a little different. For one customer, our knowledge and our lines may be enough. But for a lot of customers, that’s not enough. They may want kitting or a custom catalog or something else. You have to get in there and figure out, ‘Where can I take some pain out of

the transaction? Where can I make this customer feel better?’ Because value is a perception — it’s not always a measurable thing. Value is a lot of times the perception. It can be people, it can be things or hey, it could be a vending machine.”

It could even be a catalog. The mammoth full-line catalog of old is fading away, but it is being replaced by sleeker, more targeted versions both electronic and in print. Radunzel and White see catalogs, albeit custom products, making a comeback.

“Customers don’t want to see ‘the big book’ anymore — they want to see something that’s targeted toward them,” White observes. “So we do a protective footwear catalog. And we keep it short, with a little education in it. We need to educate you on features and benefits before we can begin the sales process. The catalog is a tool to help us begin to take you down that path. Again, it’s all about getting you to the product that is right for your needs.”

“So now we are starting to develop



little catalogs for winter products and another for foundries and a different one for flame resistant clothing,” Radunzel says. “And Safety Network is a huge resource for us on picking those brands.”

“We’ve done a very good job of getting our larger customers to buy out of custom created web catalogs,” White says. “They just log into our website and we’ve taken everything they buy from us and put those items into a custom catalog just for them — ‘These are all the items we offer and here are the items you buy from us.’”

“Our online platform is mainly a means to place their orders,” Radunzel says. “A lot of our customers place their orders electronically but we didn’t originally sell to them electronically; we sold to them on the phone or in person. But rather than fax a purchase order, call in or email an order, they go to our site and order it that way.”

### NO, IT’S NOT A COMMODITY

As a long-time safety specialist, with decades of training to back up that claim, White rankles at what he

sees as safety being the industry’s new flavor of the month.

“The unfortunate thing is that the market is going to where everybody says, ‘Yeah, we sell safety,’” he says. “I’m not okay with that. To me, the problem in the marketplace is that too many people are trying to commoditize safety.

“That’s the hard thing about safety: if I hand you a pair of safety glasses, it’s going to say ANSI Z87.1 on it, which means that they’ve shot a BB at it and dropped something on it and it didn’t break. Every safety glass is Z87.1, so what’s the difference? There’s not any difference because they shot the BB and they dropped something. So then it becomes, ‘Well, I like the fit of this one, but I like the color of this other one. I like that this one has an anti-fog coating,’ or different lens configurations, diopters or nose pads.

“So yeah, safety glass is safety glass. But the real problem in the market is you have safety for compliance and then you have safety for safety’s sake. Safety for compliance

is bull, because people out there are going to tell you, ‘Well, 1926 says that you have to wear this product here.’ Okay, so you do that. Are you safe? Because of some book that the government wrote, you checked a box and now you’re safe because you have safety glasses? But what if you have a lot of particulate matter floating around in your job? You checked that box but you’re not still not safe.”

White sees this blind faith in poorly understood published guidelines as the difference between knowing nothing and knowing just enough to be a significant danger to yourself.

“Here’s another example,” White continues. “NFPA 2112 is the flash fire standard for clothing. If you read the standard, they basically put the garment on a mannequin and then blast the hell out of it with a four-second continuous flame and then back it off. And the garment has to limit body burn to less than 50 percent.

“So you have an NFPA 2112 garment on and we’re going to limit your body burn to less than 50 percent of your body. How do you feel about that? Not too good, right? That’s the problem though.”

“That piece of equipment may save your life, and maybe you won’t die but you’re really hurt,” Radunzel adds.

“Exactly,” White says. “Maybe you didn’t die but there’s a high level

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Co-owner Mike Smeaton has safety in his blood. His father is a safety industry luminary and Mike carries on the family tradition in Quad City’s four stores that serve high-work-hazard professions.

by Tom Hammel

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of suicide in burn victims because body dysmorphia just wrecks them mentally for the rest of their lives. And why? Because some stupid book that some stupid person wrote had some stupid tests for some stupid item that said you would be only 50 percent burned. Because we took the whole thing and made it a commodity.

"It's not a commodity. It's not. Nobody can tell me that. And that's where my passion is, to tell you the difference between just being compliant and really being safe. If you just want to be compliant, yeah, I've got something out there for \$1.50 and off you go. But I'm going to try and tell you why you should care, and if you walk in here and say, 'Dave, I want to be safe,' we're going to try to get you in the best product that we can for what you're willing to invest in it."

### A LIFE-LONG EDUCATION

Such depth of knowledge comes only from a genuine, passionate interest and years of study, 25 years in Dave White's case and nine years and counting for Fred Radunzel. Both of them heavily credit the company's membership in Safety Network, (which just merged with Affiliated Distributors) for helping them and their sales force become fluent in selling and recommending safety products.

"That's the hard thing about trying to get somebody started here," White says. "When we hire a fresh

salesman and he asks, 'When do you think that I'm going to get it?' I say, 'I hope by year three you're starting to understand at least what the hell's going on.

"How do I train myself up? I read a lot," White says. "And training is one of the pillars of Safety Network. Their Safety Equipment Expert (SEE) certification program is a cornerstone in our industry. It's a combination of classroom, online and in-person training that helps give up and coming safety specialists a good foundation in safety categories, regulation and product knowledge — much more than the average distributor salesperson."

White emphasizes that learning is a lifelong pursuit, especially when lives are on the line.

"You can study safety for years, and just when you think that you know something, all of a sudden somebody asks, 'Well, what happens if it's wet?'" White says. "And then it makes you completely rethink that product class. It's not something that you learn and can just spit back out."

"That's why it's so good for all of us to go out and visit customers," Radunzel adds. "We all get out to job sites and see our customers where they work — and how they work."

"And when you've done it long enough, if you've done it here and

you go to the next site, it's amazing. There's always something that's similar," White observes. "They may do it completely different and they may not call it the same thing, but the solution that worked on one site is the same solution that you're trying to achieve over here. And once you learn that solution, you've got a good trick." **CS**

## QUAD CITY SAFETY AT A GLANCE

**FOUNDED:** 1968

**OWNERSHIP:** Privately held

**HEADQUARTERS:** Davenport, Iowa

**BRANCHES:** Clinton, Davenport and Weaver, Iowa; Henderson, Kentucky

**STAFF:** 40

**MARKETS:** Commercial and industrial, energy, road and highway



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