

LAZ PARKING

Friends in College, Friends in Business

BY JOHN VAN HORN

It was as if they were all sitting in the same room, saying the same things. But the interviews took place a month apart and in three separate cities. Alan Lazowski, Jeff Karp and Michael Harth have the same business sense:

“It’s like a family. Your company is only as good as the people in it. You can’t forget your roots. This is a hands-on business.”

All these basic philosophies permeate the discussions that **Parking Today** had with the three best friends who now run LAZ Parking.

Lazowski is the CEO and provides the vision and direction. Karp oversees the Northeast and now, with the acquisition of Sunset Parking, Harth the West Coast.

The three are friends since middle



Laz Parking’s Michael Harth, Alan Lazowski, and Jeffrey Karp.

school in Bloomfield, CT. In his senior year at college, Harth started a valet business in Southern California in 1981 and shared his idea with his friends. Lazowski and Karp followed suit in Hartford, CT, and Boston. Although LAZ Parking grew at a steady pace, it didn’t really emerge on the national parking scene until it partnered with Morgan Stanley to operate the investment bank’s lease from the city of Chicago – the 9,200-space, four-garage complex in Millennium Park. In the process, they also

caught the attention of the French parking giant Vinci Park.

“Vinci was looking to expand in the U.S., and the timing was perfect,” says Karp. “With their investment in LAZ, we now have substantial financial horsepower to scale the business.”

LAZ went on to purchase Classified Parking in Dallas, and to complete the merger and partnership with Harth’s Sunset Parking in Southern California.

“We promote from within where possible. Our employees start in on the front line so they can learn the business,” says Lazowski. “It doesn’t matter what the name of the company is; it is only as good as the people on your team.”

“We work very hard to maintain our culture and values that come from our modest backgrounds growing up in a small town,” adds Karp. “We want to remain passionate about our company and maintain the family atmosphere. We realize that as

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Vinci Park



Karp, Lazowski, and Harth at an earlier time.

we grow staying true to who we are and where we came from is our No. 1 strength”.

While it had been slow but steady growth for many years, LAZ Parking began a more aggressive growth strategy less than eight years ago with the opening of regional offices in Atlanta, Washington, DC, New York, Dallas and Chicago.

It came together in spring 2008 when LAZ acquired Sunset and merged their operations. Three best friends from age 13 were now full time partners working together.

“The melding of our two corporate cultures was a slam-dunk,” says Harth. “Because of the deep roots of our friendship for over the past 35 years, we have similar core values, which we have translated into our business model. It is a joy for Jeff, Alan and me to be working together; it’s a natural evolution as we have remained very close and consulted with one another on our businesses throughout our careers.”

“It was ironic (that) when we began comparing our two operations, we found the basics to be very similar. Our best practices were nearly identical,” says Lazowski. “All three of us live our passion. It’s something we do every day.”

“Of course we make mistakes,” says Karp. “Everyone does. Someone isn’t always going to make the right decision. It’s our response to the mistakes that counts.”

“If you let people work their way up through the ranks, other employees see that

Philippe Princet, the International Director for Vinci Park, talked with **PT** earlier this year. “The relationship with LAZ is a good one. They bring expertise to Vinci – expertise in valet, stack parking, service and their unique culture. We bring technological expertise and, of course, resources,” Princet said.

Vinci believes in local control of operations in which they invest. “You will never see a French guy running a local, non French business,” Princet said. Their operations, until their foray into Canada, where they purchased Central Parking’s 150 contracts covering 53,000 spaces, and their investment in LAZ, were in Europe where they operate in 13 countries.

“We were a bidder in Chicago and in touch with LAZ after the deal. The idea is to grow in the States with a partner that knows the culture and the territory. We are not a short-term player; we are in for the long term.

“We love technology, and we hate cash. It’s expensive to collect, transport, and is always a problem to have in a car park. It’s best to move to a technology that does not rely on cash,” Princet said.

“Our goal is to be the best before we are the largest.”

and realize that with dedication they can do the same,” says Lazowski. “Our partner and COO, Michael Kuziak, started with me as a valet shortly after we opened in 1981; without him, we would not be where we are today.”

“Being able to hire someone at a hourly rate and move them up the ladder through mentoring, coaching and training, so that they can join the ranks of senior management, is extremely rewarding to witness,” says Kuziak, who has been a key player in the company’s expansion over its 27-year history and knows first-hand the importance of everyone working together to build a positive reputation.

“We hold a weekly conference call with all our regional managers. Each gets to talk about their successes for the past week. It’s great to hear what is going on in the different regions; plus, it provides motivation. A discussion of a new project or the results of a sales call gets everyone in a positive mood.”

LAZ Parking currently operates 750 parking facilities in 17 states and 88 cities, managing in excess of 250,000 parking spaces. It has 3,200 employees and more than \$200 million in parking receipts.

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