SUCCESSFUL 25TH ANNIVERSARY POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE

WHEELING & LAKE ERIE RAILWAY
Successful 25
With a recent expansion, Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway is setting a new precedence of high-quality customer service in the region and industry.

5th Anniversary
Possible Because of Quality Customer Service.
Wheeling and Lake Erie Railway is celebrating a big milestone in 2015: its 25th anniversary.

“It’s a great success story,” shared Drew Nelson, the Vice President of Marketing, who has been with the new ownership since day one. “The first part of our history was a struggle, but the company has persevered through the rough patches to enjoy its successful present.”

The Executive Vice President of Wheeling, Jonathan Chastek, has worked for the company in positions from track maintenance, to conductor, to engineer, proving his grasp of the culture and history the railway.

“Our focus on customer service is unparalleled,” he said. “We provide the services of a Class I railroad, but can offer a better, more personal, customer experience than many of the larger rails, where it can be easy to lose sight of what’s important to clients.”

The Wheeling and Lake Erie Railway is a Class II regional railroad that provides freight service, mainly in Ohio. The company was founded in 1871 to address the need for a rail to connect Wheeling, the West Virginia coal fields, and Lake Erie port cities and facilities. Today’s Wheeling was spun off from Norfolk Southern in 1990; current management took the company over in 1992 and has seen the railway flourish since.

Chastek credited this to the team’s commitment to the continuous investment in infrastructure, brought on by the railway’s traffic increasing at a rate that was not sustainable before the investment.

Wheeling’s expansion of its yard facilities has opened up huge opportunities for the railway. With an extra 40,000 feet of track in Brewster Yard, its switching capacity—how fast the railway can switch out the cars on a train—has doubled. The company has also purchased 16 additional locomotives and increased its manpower by doubling its workforce, which includes its conductors.

Coordinating this expanded pipeline of work is no small feat, so teamwork and communication between all levels and departments within Wheeling is necessary.

“It takes teamwork from all of Wheeling’s departments, not just the guys physically moving the trains,” said Chastek. “If one part of the railroad falls, we have a big problem with logistics. The strong partnerships within all aspects of the company ensure that Wheeling can continue to move freight uninterrupted.”

This open line of communication also extends to Wheeling’s clients, with whom the company is in touch on a regular basis. Wheeling’s employees often form personal relationships

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– Jonathan Chastek, Executive VP
Wheeling and Lake Erie Railway
At a Glance

840 miles of track

Over 140,000 carloads per year

Operates in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Western Virginia, and Maryland

Largest Ohio-based railroad

Among largest regional railroads in the country

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with customers that turn into friendships over time. This often leads to loyal, repeat customers. After all, if they are happy and have a good relationship, why go anywhere else?

“One of our customers, who started with us in 2008, has stayed on with us because we do have such a good relationship. In fact, the customer currently has three operating facilities on our railroad because of this.”

Wheeling has the flexibility many Class I railroads do not have to give customers a better customer service experience. For example, Wheeling deals with a reduced bureaucratic system, and everyone is in one corporate office, meaning decisions get made faster.

When working with Wheeling, customers talk to someone in Brewster. Chastek shared that employees at the company are very focused, and the company provides a good family-style atmosphere. As proven by Chastek and Nelson, Wheeling believes in promoting from within, which creates company loyalty and pride.

And many other railroads that are Class II only offer one or two connections, and can only offer switches for clients a couple of times a week. With its competitive rates, multiple connections—many to Class I rails—and the option for clients to switch multiple times a day, Wheeling is setting the precedence in the industry.

To continue setting the standard in the industry and to grow Wheeling’s business profile, Chastek would like to see the infrastructure continue to expand, and a continuing effort to diversify the commodity base of the company.

“We want to improve the speed and capacity of the lines. Focusing on new business is a significant portion of our strategy going forward: we’re looking to convert trucking customers to rail customers.”

Nelson, when asked his hopes for the future, provided an answer that exemplified the company’s history and culture.

“I never want us to lose sight of providing excellent customer service,” he said. “That will always be the key to our success.”