

RIHM KENWORTH UPS ITS GAME IN SUPERIOR

EXPANSION WAS KEY TO MEET THE AREA'S TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

Rihm Kenworth combines the rich tradition of the Rihm family in the motor sales industry, and Kenworth, a globally recognized brand, providing customers with the best in over-the-road, heavy duty trucks. Rihm Kenworth has a strong brand presence in the Upper Midwest, and historically is the second oldest dealership for Kenworth, a foundational relationship forged in 1949.

Rihm Kenworth opened its second store in an old boat dealership on Tower Avenue in Superior in 1997. In the past year the Superior dealership was renovated and rebuilt, bringing the Rihm Kenworth look and brand appeal to the forefront.

"We're thrilled to provide a better environment for our employees to work in, in Superior," adds Rihm Kenworth's engaging CEO Kari Rihm. "The other big thing for Rihm Kenworth is that we are celebrating our 75th year as a Kenworth dealer. We are the second oldest continuously owned and operated family-owned franchise in the Kenworth network. We were the fourth dealer that was ever appointed, and there's only one dealer that has been

around longer than us, still owned by the same family. It's okay to be number two," laughs Rihm.

Company CEO and co-owner Kari Rihm learned the Superior story when she married into the family; her husband John was the third generation of the Rihm family to own and operate the business. "We had some very large fleets that were buying from us and we needed to be able to service them closer to home," she said.

For Rihm Kenworth it was an opportunity of growing their business and making key local customer relationships. Those initial very large fleets included Jeff Foster Trucking, Halvor Lines, Dave Evans, and although it's been absorbed into Halvor Lines, Sue Vinje Trucking.

"They were growing fleets and they love the Kenworth products. We knew that we needed to be there to support them," says Rihm.

Kenworth customers expect a quality product, even in the resale market. The newly renovated Superior dealership serves two purposes, says Troy Powers, Director of Parts for Rihm Kenworth, "To bring a more modern appearance and feel of our brand in the

"THE GREATEST SATISFACTION I GET IS WHEN A CUSTOMER TALKS ABOUT HOW WE HELPED THEIR BUSINESS BECOME SUCCESSFUL."

— KARI RIHM, CEO - RIHM KENWORTH



area, and have it be appealing to people in the area to come to work at our location.”

Having a climate-controlled facility, a clean environment with the latest technologies is a welcome upgrade for the roughly 30 employees at Rihm Kenworth’s Superior dealership.

“When people buy the Kenworth product, they’re buying the premier brand; the expectation is that they’re going to get premier quality aftermarket parts to fix those trucks when they need it. We are focused on selling quality.” Powers explains that quality drives the market. “We don’t position ourselves in the market as the lowest price option, but we do position ourselves as the highest quality option.”

Rihm Kenworth has been involved in global sales with their parts business for more than 30 years and sells parts in more than 55 countries outside the U.S. with Rihm Global Sales.

PACCAR is the parent company for Kenworth and Peterbilt. In Europe it’s called DAF. Powers explains that through these national relationships, made with very large fleets, they have guaranteed pricing throughout the country.

“We’re dealing with the largest fleets the world has, all the way down to an individual owner operator or municipality that has a fire truck or an ambulance. Maybe they just have one Kenworth. So, we’re dealing with everything in between. The largest portion or segment of our business is local fleets to our dealership, and then local repair shops to our dealership, as well as the individual owner operator doing his work on the weekends.”

Powers shared that he is the son of an owner-operator who grew up working on trucks on the weekends because the truck ran



all week and they had to work on it on the weekend. “I have literally been in these things since I was born in 1970,” laughed Powers. “My dad bought his first truck that year. So this has been my life since.”

As Director of Parts, Powers oversees around 115 employees across all seven dealerships and 16 leasing centers, all focused on one thing – customer service. Their customers are driven by quality, and that is what Rihm Kenworth strives daily to provide. At Superior, Powers says they have about \$1 million dollars of inventory on hand.

“The Superior shop now has 12 bays there. We have master technicians up there to repair the trucks, and we have a sales team there that sells the new trucks, and sells used trucks.” Powers says that across all their facilities, Rihm’s in-house service techs use about 20 percent of a shop’s parts inventory.





“IT HELPS US GET OUR CUSTOMERS’ VEHICLES OR TRUCKS IN AND OUT A LOT FASTER WITHOUT HAVING TO ORDER AS MANY PARTS.”

– RICH MARVEL, BRANCH SERVICE MANAGER
- RIHM KENWORTH



“It’s evolved over time for us. It isn’t like just one day this all changed. It’s been an evolution,” reflected Powers. “I guess it’s changed our industry in that the days of selling small pieces to repair larger components seem to be going away. It’s more larger component replacement now. It’s made more emphasis on the need to be able to diagnose and triage what’s wrong to make the right repair the first time, so that has changed about our role.”

The expansion at Superior means that Rihm Kenworth was able to bring on additional technicians. Powers says it gives them options. “It opens up our ability to increase jobs if we have more techs working. Those techs use parts, therefore, we hire more people in the parts department.”

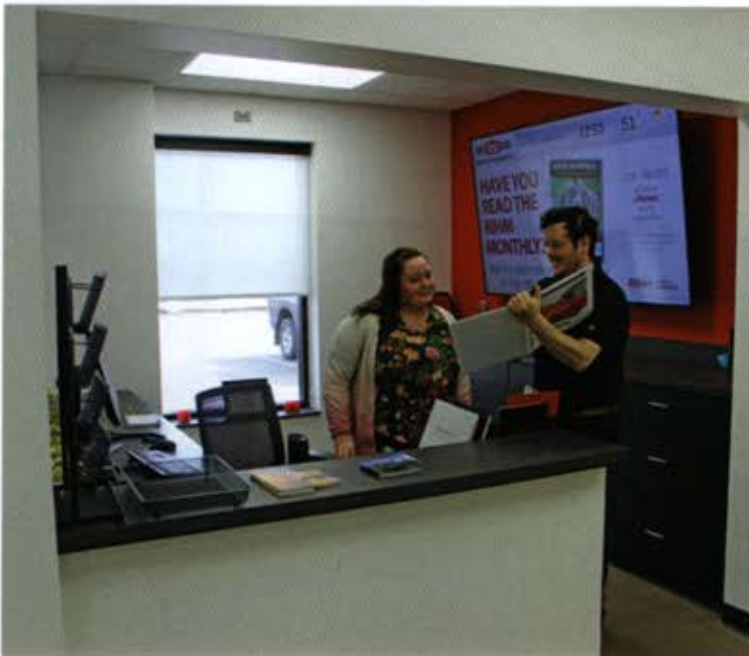
Rihm Kenworth’s Superior service center grew from 11,000 sq. feet to 28,000 sq. feet of workspace, plus an additional 6,000 square-feet of storage space to house their expansive parts inventory.

Kenny Huff is Rihm Kenworth’s Regional Service Operations Manager. Huff, a transplant from Missouri, who can trash talk Chiefs football with anybody, moved to St. Paul about nine years ago and has steadily grown with the company, including his current position to which he was promoted to in March 2023. “On

the Kenworth side, we try to be as uniform as possible,” says Huff, who adds, “there’s some location specific type systems, but for the most part, the bones are all the same. In Superior, we have nine technicians.”

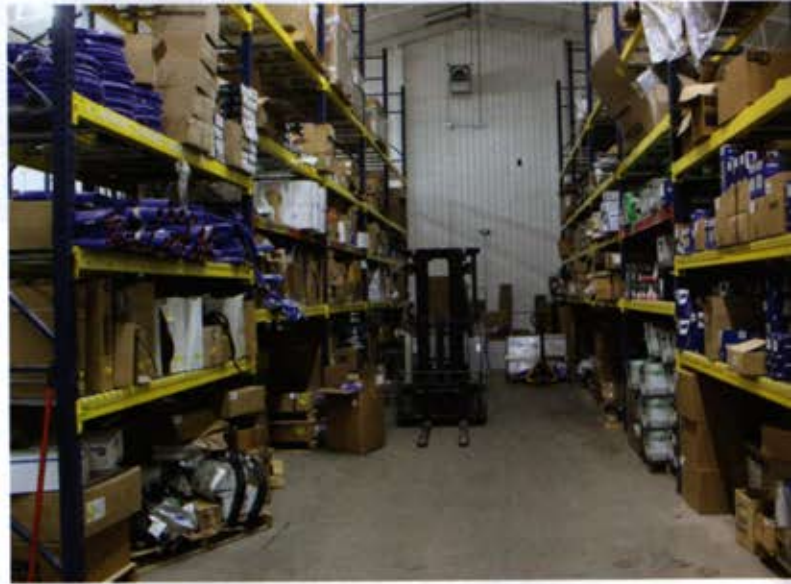
Kenworth has a criteria for training that has to be met, says Huff. He said mechanics start out with a solid ability in the basics before they advance to training in specialized areas like engines, electrical or suspension. As the technician’s progress in their careers, they are taking more and more classes to get to what’s called a Master Tech degree. The Superior Rihm Kenworth service center has one master tech now but will have a second master tech by the end of the year, in-house, says Huff.

As a service center, it’s not unusual to see just about everything that’s on the road at one time or another, based on your





Chris Marquiss, Parts Manager - Rihm Kenworth



provides loaner vehicles and an attendant who will take drivers wherever they need to go, usually the laundromat or a grocery store.

Marvel says drivers and the technicians at a Rihm dealership can also keep a real-time eye on the progress of their service needs with a tracking app called Truck Tech Plus. "Let's say a check engine light comes on," posits Marvel. "If it's one of our fleet trucks or something that we sold, we get an email on it so we can actually pull it up and see what the codes are, online, to help guide the customer, "Okay, you can drive this for another few hundred miles,"

or I can pull it up on a map and say, 'You're 50 miles from this Kenworth dealer, this Rihm dealership, you're gonna want to get in and get it checked,'" explains Marvel. He says these are examples of the direction, with the use of technology, they're moving forward with in trying to help reduce downtime for their customers.

"Our company goal is to be the favorite brand dealership in our area," says Rihm. "That is our ultimate goal. What do you mean by favorite? I don't know about you, but my favorite place to go to dinner isn't necessarily the fanciest or the most expensive, or the most popular place in town. It's really the place that I go where I feel welcome. And I feel comfortable. So, from talking about being the favorite, that's the perspective that we use. Our goal is twofold, that and also to cover our territory as best we can to service the trucking industry."

The Superior Rihm Kenworth dealership covers a large swath of Northwestern Wisconsin, as far east of Superior as Hurley, then down





"WE DON'T POSITION OURSELVES IN THE MARKET AS THE LOWEST PRICE OPTION, BUT WE DO POSITION OURSELVES AS THE HIGHEST QUALITY OPTION."

– TROY POWERS, DIRECTOR OF PARTS - RIHM KENWORTH

toward Hayward to the south, over to near Sandstone in a southwesterly, as the geese fly, direction and up north of course, covering the Range up to International Falls, and add in the North Shore.

"There are a lot of great trucking companies up there, and there's a lot of industry up there. It isn't just on the Superior side. I mean, it's the Twin Ports. (emphasis on Twin)."

Kari Rihm has shown a remarkable aptitude to running the family business, and understanding the environment she works in. "It is one of the largest inland ports in the country. A lot of goods come and go from there and nothing gets onto a ship unless it's ridden on a truck. Nothing gets off the ship, unless it goes by a truck.

We know that it's a really important economic hub and want to be able to support it with trucks that run."

We have some great team members, says Kari Rihm. "It's never one person who makes the success, who creates the success. It's a matter of having the right people in the right seats. And we strive






for that. It's retention of great people," says Rihm, who looks at her role as the placeholder for the next generation of the Rihm family to ascend to company leadership. "I think the company has been intact since 1932, the dealership business, and through the third generation, each has faced their own challenges. When I look back at the history that's over 90-some years, I think the success comes from perseverance, and vision, that things will get better when they're bad. I mean, going through several wars, going through economic depressions and recessions."

"Considering all the changes in laws and regulations leads to another part of our conversation," resets Rihm. "I think the drive towards cleaner trucks, all of those things have been very difficult. And just..." Rihm paused for a moment before continuing. "I think our biggest crisis came when my husband passed away. And gosh, look at how much we've grown since then. I would rather have my husband, but I wasn't going to be idle or just give up, either. So again, it's that perseverance through hard times that I think really helps, because you can look back and say, 'Oh, look at what I got through. Look at what we managed to do, even in the midst of that.' So, it isn't having a short-term vision, it's having a long-term vision and with that history to look back on."

Trucking is a bellwether of the economy, says Rihm. She keeps an eye on things like raw materials being hauled into manufacturing plants, and finished product being hauled out. "When we see a dip in there, we know there's something bad happening with our econ-

omy overall. I think trucking has suffered a recession. Things are beginning to look a little bit better, but it could be mid-year before things are getting charged up again." Rihm keeps her ear toward what the economic indicators say, and sees a still distant future transitioning towards alternative fuel vehicles, putting a lot of pressure on the industry as well.

Having history means seeing a lot of change, and making that change to stay vital and relevant. At Rihm Kenworth, the customers are king.

"The greatest satisfaction I get is when a customer talks about how we helped their business become successful. That's the mark of true success, when you've been able to help somebody else be successful. And it has a waterfall effect because they trust you, and they want to come back and they want to sustain the relationship. We have customers that we've had since the 30s that still buy from us," smiles Rihm. "It's very satisfying to retain business. It's also very satisfying to retain employees who are maybe thinking of leaving, because when they make the true comparison, they find out that the grass is not greener on the other side. We're very, very good to our employees. I think that's part of being a family business. Family businesses really are dominant in the trucking industry, from dealerships to trucking companies." 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior

