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## Banker-turned-dry cleaner grows Spokane chain

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### Schellings' stores to hit \$1.5 million in revenues this year, up from 2004

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For most of Donald Schelling's career, the only thing he knew about dry cleaning was that he used such shops to clean suits he wore to his job as a sales manager at Washington Trust Bank.

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After his position with the bank was eliminated in the late 1990s and he had put in short stints with a couple of other Spokane-area businesses, Schelling decided to become his own boss and to pursue a second career—in the business of dry cleaning. Maxing out credit cards and borrowing money from a friend, Schelling bought the Martinizing Cleaners of Spokane chain in 2001 from Boise-based Westco Inc.

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Six stores strong now and with 48 employees in all, Schelling's dry-cleaning chain is on pace to tote up \$1.5 million in sales this year, up about 5 percent compared with the previous year, and expects to finish in the black for the third straight year.

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"The business is growing nicely," Schelling says. "I think my reputation and quality of workmanship is becoming better known."

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Through D.C. Schelling Inc., Schelling and his wife, Patty, own four of the old Westco shops, which still go by the Martinizing name. Those include two on Spokane's South Hill, at 2525 E. 29th and 3112 S. Grand Blvd.; one on Spokane's North Side, at 6319 N. Wall; and one in Spokane Valley, at 215 N. Sullivan. When he bought the small chain, it included a fifth Westco location that Schelling shut down shortly after completing the transaction.

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After buying their first cluster of stores, the Schellings also bought two additional, independent outlets through a company called Patty's Inc. Those stores are South Country Cleaners, on the South Hill at 1314 S. Grand, and one at 9219 E. Sprague, in Spokane Valley, that's now called Schelling's Dry Cleaners.

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Editor's Desk

Early on, Patty's also opened two additional stores, one in downtown Spokane and one on the North Side, but closed both of those within a year.

[Commentary](#)

Schelling is penetrating new parts of the Spokane market now, but not with brick-and-mortar outlets. Last month, he launched a dry-cleaning delivery service through which the company will pick up and drop off dry cleaning and laundry at a customer's residence.

[Editorial Cartoon](#)

He is marketing the new offering as a "door-to-door valet service" and is targeting just the Indian Trail neighborhood, on the North Side, so far.

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Soon, however, he hopes to begin offering the service in other, select neighborhoods. Eventually, he says, he hopes to have four or five delivery vans canvassing much of the Spokane area.

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Generally, Schelling says, a driver will pick up clothes on a designated day each week and return them three days later.

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He says he fought the idea of offering a door-to-door valet service for a couple of years, but decided to do so after hearing that other dry cleaners were enjoying success by offering the service in other areas.

[Location](#)

"Every quality dry cleaner I talk to is doing this," Schelling says.

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With its current in-store business, roughly 70 percent of the chain's revenues come from dry-cleaning services and about 20 percent from laundry services—washing and pressing shirts and other garments that don't have to be dry cleaned. The remaining 10 percent of the business involves specialized services, such as alterations and reweaving, as well as services that Schelling contracts out, such as leather cleaning and fine carpet cleaning.

Schelling handles some commercial dry cleaning; accounts include the city of Spokane Police Department, the Spokane Club, and 11 Spokane-area hotels. Commercial accounts, however, only generate 5 percent of the chain's total revenues.

Four of the small chain's six stores are considered wet stores, where dry cleaning is performed, and two are dry stores, where clothes are dropped off and picked up after being cleaned at one of the wet stores.

The main laundry facility is located at the North Side store.

Schelling currently doesn't have plans to expand the number of locations in the small chain, but each store's customer-service area has been remodeled and updated in the last couple of years. His wife doesn't work in the stores, but she headed up the revamps.

"When you walk into a store, I want you to feel comfortable," he says. "I don't want it to feel like just any dry cleaners."

#### White collar, blue collar

As he talks, Schelling's roots in sales and marketing surface, especially when he talks about his relationships with his customers.

Schelling says he knows many of the chain's regular customers by name and strives to get to know them better. Last Christmas, he says, he sent bottles of champagne, chocolates, and other gifts to his most loyal customers.

Many days, though, Schelling won't be donning suits and schmoozing with customers, but instead will be in the back of one of the stores in work clothes, with tools in hand. While he has carried over some white-collar practices from his first career, Schelling also has developed blue-collar skills as the main equipment-maintenance and repair man for his stores.

Most of the store's dry-cleaning equipment is between 15 and 20 years old, and he says he has replaced most replaceable parts on that equipment over the past five years and provides routine maintenance regularly. For some more complex repairs, he'll bring in a specialist, but he's found that he can handle much of the repair work himself.

"I'm fortunate," he says. "I guess I learned from my dad that I can figure these things out."

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