

National

# Clothesline



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## Fast and Finicky

Once in a while, Alex Najafi finds himself missing the days when he owned his own horse and would go on daily rides, often jumping, sometimes falling off, but always having fun.

The name of the majestic Percheron was "Persian Cowboy." According to Alex, that particular equestrian breed makes for a "stocky horse with the attitude of a thoroughbred. She was fast and finicky."

Those two words could also aptly describe his San Rafael drycleaning plant known as [Alex's Dry Cleaning Valet](#). It provides exceptionally "fast" same-day service for all of its Marin County clients, and next-day service for those who reside in the surrounding areas, such as San Francisco.

As for "finicky," well, it's hard to say who that word suits more, Alex or his customers. It doesn't matter, though. Alex's philosophy is that there is no such thing as "one size fits all" for his clientele.

"It's not just: send the clothes in and, as drycleaners, we do what we think should be done," he explained. "We are at your service, at every whim and request that you have. No request is odd. No special instruction is out of the realm of possibility."

Holding such high regard for quality and customer service, it's not surprising that Alex's Dry Cleaning Valet was voted the "Best Drycleaner in the Bay Area" by The San Francisco Chronicle and SFGate.com in 2008.

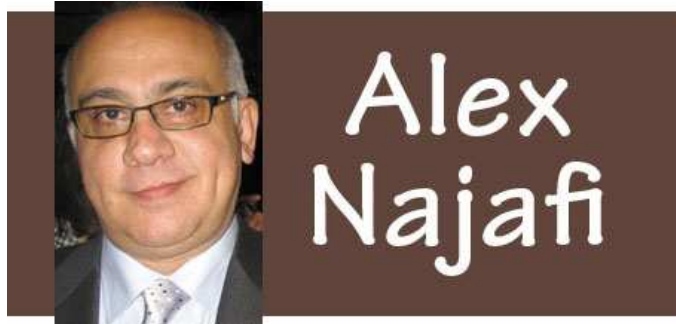
Being a successful drycleaning plant owner in California was the last thing Alex envisioned for himself when he grew up in Tehran, Iran.

If anything, he believed he would follow in his father's footsteps and take over his business someday.

"My father was a doctor of pharmacy, so he basically had a pharmaceutical business in Iran," Alex noted. "He was like the sole importer and distributor for many large Danish, American, Japanese and Russian companies that export medicine."

Growing up in Iran's capital city a half century ago was quite difficult at times, especially in terms of educational opportunities.

"The universities were few with many applicants," he said. "Usually only two or three percent of the people would get into universities. Things have changed since, but back then it was basically a good 90 percent of



the people either had to go to military service or be shipped out to some foreign country for continuing their education.”

After graduating high school, Alex attended the University of Saskatchewan in Canada for a year before he returned to Iran and graduated with a bachelor’s degree.

Then, he traveled to California and earned a master’s degree in political science at the University of San Francisco and a master’s degree in international business at St. Mary’s College.

Alex still planned to work alongside his father at his pharmaceutical business, but his plans changed abruptly.

“By then, the revolution had happened in Iran, and the hostage crisis,” he recalled. “I stayed here and decided that I needed to get into business and make a family here.”

In 1983, Alex turned his attention to the drycleaning industry and bought a One Hour Martinizing franchise. For the next few years, he poured himself into learning the craft so he could grow his business. It’s a trait that he learned from his father.

“I think he showed a lot of persistence and hard work, and also he was a risk-taker,” he said. “To me, that was kind of visionary. In everything you can do, you can do it either small, or try to make the best of it and make it big.”

After five years of running a Martinizing franchise, Alex decided it was time for a change. He wanted his name on the business.

“I decided that it’s best to basically brand my own quality and my own service with my own name,” he recalled. “Perhaps having your own personal name on your business kind of lends itself to the perception that someone is actually standing behind the work.”

During the early days of the business, Alex wanted to differentiate himself as much as possible. He believed the best way to do that was to offer free delivery service.

“If you just stay in one place and be focussed on a one-mile radius geographically, you are very, very limited,” he explained. “I thought that our market was much bigger than one mile.”

Because delivering drycleaning was not fashionable in the area at that time, Alex faced an odd stumbling block.

“At first the challenge was convincing customers that there was no catch, no extra charge,” he laughed. “People would come into the store and drop off and get a copy of the receipt with all of the prices and everything. Then, we would ask them, ‘Would you like this delivered to you house?’ By then, they knew what the price was so they would know they were not being charged extra.”

While his shrewd strategy played a big part in his business’s expansion, another crucial factor helped Alex in ways he could not have predicted.

“Our whole San Francisco market started by basically our reputation and the word-of-mouth being carried over like a spillover from Marin County,” he said. “It all happened when one of our very, very good clients moved to a prestigious San Francisco hotel residence called the Four Seasons.”

The client tried numerous local cleaning companies, but was dissatisfied when they all failed to live up to the same standard’s as Alex’s Dry Cleaning Valet.

“He called us and asked us to please come over and continue doing service with him and then he’d put in a good word with the concierge of the hotel. Basically, that is how that market all started, with just one customer.”

Nowadays, Alex’s Dry Cleaning Valet has delivery routes reaching out in every direction, requiring eight delivery vans to gather it all up.

Many of the major hotels in the area utilize the service, as well as many of the local celebrities and socialites.

In fact, Alex’s Dry Cleaning Valet’s reputation has also penetrated numerous high fashion retail stores in the area that feature names such as Wilkes Bashford, Gene Hiller, Prada, Christian Dior and Neiman Marcus. Such shops always recommend the cleaners for maintaining their fine attire.

Recently, the company moved to a 6,000-sq.-ft warehouse where it houses 23 employees altogether. Most of the time, none are needed to man the front counter since about 99 percent of Alex’s production work comes off its delivery vehicles.

With so little foot traffic coming in the shop, Alex had to come up with creative ways to offer a personal touch when it comes to keeping in touch with his customer base.

“When customers sign up, we provide them with welcome kits that give them everything they need in order to communicate with us, from a note pad and a pen to red tape and any stain markers they need to have,” he said. “We put everything in there for them so if they need to communicate with us, they can still do that.”

Alex provides an 800 number so his clients can call with any special instructions or requests. They can also type that information in when they make a garment pickup request online.

“There’s a variety of ways they can communicate with us,” he added. “The communication channel is available. It’s very open. It’s very personalized so the customers won’t feel like they are sending their clothes to a black hole.”

In 2007, Alex estimated that his company had purchased five tons of plastic that year, which was unacceptable to the owner of the same company that was featured on National Public Radio in 1992 as one of the leading cleaners in the environmental field.

During 2008, Alex switched over to elegant reusable garment bags.

“You can imagine how much plastic we are avoiding and preventing from ending up in the landfills. Customers really like that,” he noted. “Basically, the switch was not something that was easy for us to adopt and make customers adapt to, but through our constant communication that we try to have with our customers — through Internet, e-mail, newsletters and so on and so forth — we tried to change those habits. Changing those habits helps them and it helps us.”

Alex is no stranger to change. He possesses an inner drive that propels him to raise the bar so high for himself and others that few will be able to attain that level. Thus, he keeps looking for new ways to improve his business, even if it means inventing things.

About 20 years ago, he enlisted his brother, Dr. Ron Najafi (CEO and Chairman of NovaBay Pharmaceutical) to help him come up with a superior soap detergent.

"I felt that the laundry detergent we were using was too harsh for the fabrics, for the colors, and was basically putting the fabric through a one-two punch of alkaline and acid," he said. "I decided to ask him for help in finding the best formula that does the job but retains the vibrancy of the fabric."

The end results was Alex's Soap Detergent, which Alex uses at his plant and sells to the public.

Overall, Alex is quite proud of all of the things he has accomplished during his 25 years in the industry, but he will never be completely satisfied.

"We don't get too full of ourselves," he explained. "At no time do we think we're the best. I always think there is somebody better than me or somebody right on my tail."