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**OCTANE**



# Crystal clear

## See-through buildings and bright lights stand out

BY ANNE DONNELLY

After more than 20 years in carwashes, entrepreneurs Norm Siegel and Mike Kinslow began to see the future clearly. It could even be said that their secret of success became transparent.

Siegel, an owner of four washes in Indiana, and Kinslow, an equipment salesman, combined their expertise in 1995 to conceive a see-through carwash. More than two years after building the first one, the pair's

Lighthouse Carwash Systems is closing in on its 80th facility in the United States.

Siegel recalls, "About seven years ago Mike came to me and said he found an auto wash that did a good job. I was operating a full-service wash at the time, so auto washers weren't on my most popular list. Gas stations were adding auto washes that they were giving away with gas fill-ups and it was cutting into my business."

Kinslow proposed a partnership with convenience stores to replace old washes with new ones using a breed of automatic equipment trademarked Autec. "I decided that if I wasn't going to beat them, I might as well join them," says Siegel.

The pair initially installed three systems in northern Ohio. Customers made favourable comments. The pair got requests from convenience stores to build carwashes from

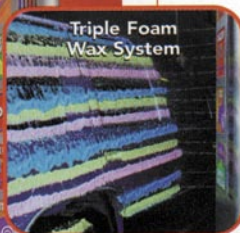
the ground up. To make the idea profitable, Siegel and Kinslow needed to ensure the construction process went quickly. They also faced a financial problem. No one would lend them money to construct a wash on property that was owned by a third party. That is when they hit upon the idea of building portable glass facilities that needed only a concrete slab as ground preparation.

After many months of plan-



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ning, and what Siegel called “an extremely involved process”, the pair came up with a thermopane glass and polycarbonate building. The material is described as “indestructible plastic.” The side walls are 11 feet high and made of glass, while a polycarbonate “knee wall” separates the glass from the ground. The roof is glass as well.

“We went back to our full-service experience and realized that customers liked watching the wash process. They stood at the windows of my full-service line and were mystified as they watched their car being soaped and rinsed . . . we decided we needed a lot of glass. We started with glass on the sides, then the ends. Eventually we decided on an all-glass building.”

Other construction materials include powder-coated aluminum, available in 80 colours, and rust-proof stainless steel fasteners. The partners can have a new car wash up and running in five days.

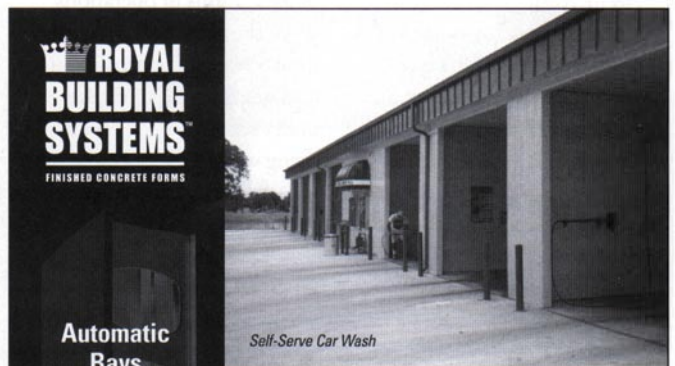
The first Lighthouse carwash was erected at a BP station in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Across a highway sits the headquarters of Tokheim gas pumps. The wash came to prominence when a magazine editor visiting Tokheim noticed the transparent building and wrote about it. The publicity generated a flood of inquiries. But the partners decided to let the BP wash run

for a year to work out any bugs before marketing the wash. Their patience paid. The year included trials that proved the pair had hit on a product built to last. Golf ball-sized hail pellets from a tornado that touched down two miles away did not damage the building. The Lighthouse site also kept on washing through a blizzard that dropped 18 inches of snow on Fort Wayne.

Siegel credits the building’s marketing success to curb appeal. The place looks fresh and clean, with illumination that doubles as free night-time advertising. Surveys of wash operators have also shown the well-lit facilities to be favourites of women, who feel more secure where bright lights ward off loiterers.

Siegel says the transparent carwashes’ performance speaks for itself. “We have not had one c-store location that hasn’t doubled the national average of what a traditional carwash will generate.” Generally, carwash revenue is 5% of gas sales. Lighthouse claims 10%-15% of revenue.

While Siegel swears the Lighthouse wash could handle the Canadian climate, he said it is unlikely the name will show up in Canada any time soon. “My understanding is that in Canada, you need an R (insulation) rating. Because our buildings are all glass, we can’t give an R-rating.” ■



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