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## ON THE FENCE

Portable restrooms complement  
Cal-State Site Services offerings

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## DISASTER IN MINOT

A-1 Evans scrambles to help  
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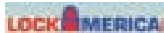













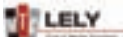
















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Rick Modlin sits on a stack of fencing in the yard at Cal-State Site Services in Ventura, Calif. (Photo by Stephen Osman)

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# What Else Can We Do For You?

**EVERY WORK SITE REQUIRES A VARIETY OF SUPPORT SERVICES. ARE YOU LEAVING MONEY ON THE TABLE BY PROVIDING ONLY PORTABLE RESTROOMS?**

By Jim Kneiszel

**W**hat came first, the portable sanitation or other construction site services? For our *PROfile* company this month, **Cal-State Site Services**, a million feet of fencing was amassed before owner **Rick Modlin** decided to add portable restrooms to his successful company's offerings.

"We've seen prices driven down in our industry, and customers want one-stop shopping – one invoice instead of two or three for various services," Modlin explains to writer **Ken Wysocky**. "The only way to compete is to add another product and develop another revenue stream. And the most logical thing for us is portable sanitation."

For you, the established portable sanitation provider in your region, Modlin's game plan might work in reverse. You might be able to find another revenue stream with fencing ... or roll-off containers ... or full-service cleaning, to name a few.

Whichever way it works, small service businesses are finding that expanding their menu means selling more services – and bringing in more revenue – from each customer.

It makes perfect sense. If you already provide the portable rest-

You know the vast majority of existing customers can be counted on to pay their bills promptly ... or you probably would have stopped working for them a long time ago. And more income from fewer accounts reduces paperwork and lightens the burden on your office staff. And a staff freed from shuffling papers and trying to collect on bills has more time to spend on new marketing efforts.

All these factors point to the synergies of expanding your offerings. This is why we like to focus a few issues of *PRO* every year to the importance of diversification. If you haven't broadened your scope, you might be missing out on some significant opportunities in your home territory. You can bet your competitors are looking for more ways to serve customers, and using new skills and equipment to wrestle business away from you.

## **YOUR COMPETITORS ARE DOING IT**

It doesn't take much Web surfing to find companies looking to get onto a construction site or special event and then explode their offerings to become a dominant service provider for that customer. In a few

minutes of Internet research, I was able to find some great examples of companies that aggressively market their emphasis on one-stop-shopping.

### **The name says it all.**

Take **Mr. Dirt**, for example. The company with locations in

Texas, Arizona and Nevada (check them out at [www.mrdirtusa.com](http://www.mrdirtusa.com)) started with street sweeping, then added portable sanitation, water truck services and high-pressure power washing. Their services offerings include everything from street washing to dust suppression and swimming pool fills to stain removal. They land a customer, then say, "Now what else can we do for you?"

### **We clean everything.**

And then there's **American Companies** in Kansas City. The company has posted a great video review of its services here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IZYCude-Fk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IZYCude-Fk). The business is split into three distinct subsidiaries to try and capitalize on all aspects of site cleanup. **American Waste Systems** sells restrooms and roll-off containers. **American Sweeping Inc.** offers sweeper trucks. **American Labor Source Inc.** provides the manpower to clean everything from construction sites to parade routes.

One of their concepts is offering "day porters," workers who comb work sites to keep them constantly clean. They also offer to go beyond

## **ONE PRINCIPLE OF SELLING SMALL BUSINESS SERVICES IS THAT IT REQUIRES LESS EFFORT TO UPSELL EXISTING CUSTOMERS THAN TO START COLD CALLING FOR NEW CUSTOMERS. THAT'S WHY THEY ALWAYS ASK IF YOU WANT FRIES WITH YOUR BURGER AT THE FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT DOWN THE STREET.**

rooms for a small construction company, wouldn't they want to hire you – a known quantity and quality provider – when they need a container, a site office or storage trailer, or workers to clean up after they leave the jobsite?

And this idea of rolling up services extends beyond the construction site. If you deliver 30 restrooms to your local county fair this summer, wouldn't the fair organizers be relieved to find you also could deliver the trash receptacles, fencing to control crowds on country music night, or water tanks to serve their food vendors?

### **IT'S THE UPSSELL**

After all, one principle of selling small business services is that it requires less effort to upsell existing customers than to start cold calling for new customers. That's why they always ask if you want fries with your burger at the fast-food restaurant down the street.

But more than simply raising your revenue-per-customer ratio, expanding service to your biggest clients makes it easier when it comes time to send invoices and seek payment later on.



the restroom at special events with what they call the Total Venue Division, which provides portable stages ... and even DJs and bands for private parties.

**We're green and growing.**

**Green Tech Transfer & Recycling** of South Bend, Ind., promoted its **Eco-Hut** restrooms and service diversification on a local public television program, Outdoor Elements, which you can see here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwUiDDEj-cs&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwUiDDEj-cs&feature=related).

Green Tech heavily promotes a reputation for environmentally friendly service with its portable sanitation business, and extends that same business philosophy to its work in materials recovery. As part of its site services offerings, Green Tech accepts a variety of materials, from construction debris to wood, plastic and glass, then seeks new markets where it can sell the discarded waste.

**DON'T LOSE THE PORTABLE SANITATION FOCUS**

While diversification can be a good idea, I don't mean to say you should expand at the expense of the quality portable sanitation service you provide. You can never forget the core business that brought you success and built your reputation in the community. After all, if there is one area of site services where customers won't stand for poor service, it's where clean sanitation is involved.

So, think about expanding your site services offerings when it's logical, you have the ability to do so and the market will accept it. But be careful not to spread yourself too thin and sacrifice your good name in the community. ■

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*Writer Judy Kneiszel has operated her own small business for 15 years and is familiar with the many rewards and challenges of business ownership. Write to her with questions, comments or topic suggestions at [thewordhouse@ameritech.net](mailto:thewordhouse@ameritech.net).*



# Extreme Makeover: Office Edition?

**YOU PROBABLY TAKE YOUR OFFICE SPACE FOR GRANTED, BUT HOW IT'S DECORATED AND MAINTAINED SAYS A LOT ABOUT YOU AND YOUR COMPANY**

By Judy Kneiszel

**S**ome portable sanitation companies are finding that it pays to show off a little. If they get a call asking about portable restrooms for a wedding, party or other special event, they invite the potential customer in to check them out. They have created indoor showrooms within their office space so customers can, while not actually “try before they buy,” at least see the units up close and slam a few doors before making a selection.

In-person customers get a better idea of restroom sizes and understand the features of different models. It's much easier to show than tell. Customers also can see the colors better than they can visualize them over the phone. But beware: Inviting customers into your office space makes them privy to much more than the features of the privies.

## SPRUCE UP YOUR SPACE

Any time the public enters your place of business – whether it's to check out your special event units or pay their bill – they judge you and your company by what they see when they walk through the door. To improve your image, try these office makeover tips:

## ANY TIME THE PUBLIC ENTERS YOUR PLACE OF BUSINESS – WHETHER IT'S TO CHECK OUT YOUR SPECIAL EVENT UNITS OR PAY THEIR BILL – THEY JUDGE YOU AND YOUR COMPANY BY WHAT THEY SEE WHEN THEY WALK THROUGH THE DOOR.

**1. Make your office a neutral zone.** There have been some really close elections around the country lately. Do you know what that means? It means, chances are about half the population disagrees with whatever views you hold or candidate you support. Do you really want to alienate half of your potential customers by decorating your office with controversial political cartoons, bumper stickers, campaign signs, etc.? Take them down. Don't lose the business of their birthday party because you don't belong to their political party.

**2. Remove the dead (plants, that is).** If you aren't responsible enough to keep a plant watered, can you really handle bigger things like keeping 10 restrooms clean?

**3. Dispose of empty food and beverage containers.** Again, what does having a messy desk say for your standards of cleanliness? It should be easier to clean a desk than a restroom.

**4. Take down the inappropriate pictures (or just unattractive) pictures.** Some brides-to-be might find Miss May of your “pinup calendar”

a bit offensive when they come to check out restrooms. The picture of you on the beach in your Speedo or raunchy photos of your bachelor party might creep some customers out a little too. A simple, respectable family picture on your desk sends a more appealing message.

**5. Pare down the toys.** A few toys on your desk say you are fun-loving and they can be good conversation starters. Too many say you are immature, easily distracted and won't be giving the customer your full attention.

**6. Get rid of the outdated equipment.** That dot-matrix printer in the corner that hasn't worked since the '90s says you're too lazy to properly dispose of it, and it's taking up space that could be utilized for your showroom.

**7. Dump the butts.** As smoke-free workplaces become the law in more and more cities and states, people become less tolerant of smoke odors. Even if you can smoke in your office, don't put people off by doing it. At the very least, keep your ashtrays clean and empty. Not only has smoking become somewhat controversial, a heaping ashtray is another sign that says you can't keep anything clean.

## A SPACE TO BE PROUD OF

After you've cleaned up your office space, assess its condition. Could a new coat of paint in a bright, clean color improve it? After you've painted, hang some posters or artwork that makes people think “fresh” and “clean” – like nature scenes.

Make sure the office floor is clean, or consider replacing the floor covering if you can't get it clean anymore. If you think greenery is a nice touch, replace those dead plants you removed with low maintenance ivy or bamboo, or even lower maintenance life-like silk plants. There are also services you can hire to water and maintain live plants.

Arrange furniture to appear welcoming, which means don't sit with your back to the door. If there's room, arrange a comfortable seating area where you can meet with customers to discuss their needs. And think about creating that showroom of units so people can visualize them at their events.

Not only will cleaning and updating your workplace make it more customer-friendly, you might just enjoy coming to work more in your “new” office, and that will make you more customer friendly too. ■

**Have you set up a restroom products showroom at your business? What have you done to spruce up the office and make it more inviting for customers? Share your ideas by dropping a line to [editor@promonthly.com](mailto:editor@promonthly.com). We'll publish your responses in an upcoming issue of *PRO*.**



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Portable sanitation products and fencing share the yard at Cal-State Site Services in Ventura, Calif. (Photos by Stephen Osman)



### MAJOR CALIFORNIA FENCE PROVIDER CAL-STATE SITE SERVICES ADDS PORTABLE SANITATION AS A DIVERSIFICATION PLAY

# ON THE FENCE

By Ken Wysocky

Cal-State owner Rick Modlin (left) and manager Eric Giffin pose with their complementary offerings, fencing and portable restrooms.



Portable restroom operators interested in generating a new revenue stream – as well as establishing a logical launching pad for developing more complementary on-site services – could benefit from the experience of Rick Modlin, owner of Cal-State Site Services Inc. in Simi Valley, Calif.

As the recession worsened and eroded profit margins at his temporary-fencing business, Modlin became more and more intrigued with diversification. Eventually, he acted on something he'd observed for years: When contractors need temporary fencing, odds are they also need portable restrooms – and would prefer to rent them both from the same supplier.

That's why his company, recently renamed Cal-State Site Services Inc., bought Nature Calls Port A Potties (now known as Nature Calls Sanitation Inc.) in nearby Oxnard in September 2010. In addition, the company is in the process of acquiring another restroom company to further diversify its business base. That should go a long way toward making Cal-State less reliant on

one revenue stream and less vulnerable to cyclical economic downturns.

"We've always thought about getting into portable restrooms, but we really got serious after the economy went south," Modlin says. "We've seen prices driven down in our industry, and customers want one-stop shopping – one invoice instead of two or three for various services.

"Our profit margins are so slim now ... the only way to compete is to add another product and develop another revenue

#### Cal-State Site Services Inc. Ventura, Calif.

Owner: Rick Modlin  
Founded: 1991  
Employees: 24  
Service area: Southern and parts of central California  
Website: [www.rentfence.com](http://www.rentfence.com)



(continued)

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stream,” he continues. “And the most logical thing for us is portable sanitation.”

### BALANCE THE BUSINESS

Even Modlin’s diversification efforts are diversified. Nature Calls is primarily an agricultural-focused sanitation company that owned 450 restrooms (made primarily by Five Peaks Technology and Satellite Industries Inc.), several custom-made trailer units and three older vacuum trucks (an International with a steel 1,100-gallon waste/400-gallon freshwater tank and two Fords, one with a steel 600-gallon waste/200-gallon freshwater tank and the other with a steel 800-gallon waste and 200-gallon freshwater tank). And the restroom business Cal-State is in the process of buying mainly caters to special events.

“This gives us a pretty strong trifecta – a well-balanced company,” he says. “No matter what happens with the economy, people have to eat. So that (agricultural) industry doesn’t see economic slumps the way the construction

industry does.”

To support its new endeavors, Cal-State bought a 2011 Freightliner M2, built by T & B Sales Inc., with a stainless steel 1,100-gallon waste/500-gallon freshwater tank. The company also bought 300 more restroom units from Five Peaks. The company also has 25 ADA-compliant We’ll Care restrooms and 25 Bravo handwash units from PolyJohn Enterprises Corp.

“Our short-term goal is to get 1,000 units out there within a year,” Modlin says. “We hope we can pull some accounts in by leveraging existing business relationships.”

### FENCE MAKES SENSE

Just as diversifying into portable restrooms made sense for Cal-State, branching out into temporary fencing could make sense for some portable restroom operators, who should find themselves on familiar ground, in terms of supplying site services. To make this diversification play, it’s instructive to learn how Modlin’s emphasis on customer service and new technology helped the company (formerly known as Cal-State Rent A Fence Inc.) grow into one of Southern California’s larger temporary-fencing contractors.

Modlin started out with a general engineering and contracting business called Classic Construction Services, which special-

ized in water and sewer projects. He got into fencing in the late 1980s when he realized the company was spending \$20,000 a year on temporary fencing to protect historic oak trees standing on jobsites throughout Ventura County. His conclusion: “That’s crazy – we should be doing this ourselves.”

Modlin invested in some metal fencing, on which he hung signs to advertise Classic’s services. But a funny thing happened: Calls started rolling in, asking if the company did fencing, too.

“We started saying, ‘OK, sure, we can do that,’” Modlin recalls. “A light bulb kind of went off ... that this seemed to be a little business entity that might work on its own.”

In 1991, Modlin founded Cal-State as a separate company and sold Classic a year later. Phone book advertising generated enough initial business for the company to start competing with larger site services companies, Modlin says.

Things mushroomed from there, with the company never recording less than 40 percent annual sales growth – until the most recent recession hit. But even then, Cal-State didn’t experience a real slowdown until 2010, buoyed by business from banks that needed fences erected to protect foreclosed homes from vandals.

### UNEXPECTED BOOST

No businessman wants to benefit from tragedy. But the fact of the matter is that Cal-State’s fortunes soared in the wake of the Northridge earthquake in January 1994, which measured 6.7 on the Richter scale and did an estimated \$20 billion in damage. Driven mostly

*(continued)*



Above, Filemon (left) and Ruben Rosales load fencing onto a flatbed truck for delivery. Below, Mariano Cortez adds fencing to a portable restroom order.



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Above, guided by Filemon Rosales, Rubin Rosales uses a forklift to move rolls of chain link fence. At right, flatbed trucks are loaded and ready to deliver fencing frames and posts. Cal-State maintains more than a million feet of fencing.

by an almost overwhelming need to fence off damaged homes and other structures, Cal-State's fencing inventory increased to 500,000 feet from 50,000 feet in just one year. The pace was frantic, Modlin says.

"We basically were hiring anyone who owned a pickup truck and could pile in a couple rolls of fencing and a posthole digger, from friends to friends of friends – anyone who was willing to work for us," he says. "Within a year, we went from two trucks to eight and from two phone lines to six.

"We'd sent out guys with blank rental-agreement contracts because when they'd go

out to a job, neighbors would come out and ask for service, too," he adds. "We couldn't keep up with the work." Modlin acknowledges that Cal-State probably wouldn't be as big as it is today, with an inventory of more than one million feet of chain-link fence, without the earthquake.

"A lot of what we do involves natural disasters, such as wildfires, mudslides and earthquakes that sometimes require us to fence off

**"OUR PHILOSOPHY IS ON SITE, ON TIME, EVERY TIME. IF WE SAY SOMETHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN AT A CERTAIN TIME, WE MAKE IT HAPPEN. WE ALL HAVE ABOUT THE SAME PRICES, SO IT'S THE ONLY WAY WE CAN DIFFERENTIATE OURSELVES."**

**Rick Modlin**



entire blocks for insurance liability reasons," Modlin says. "I hate to say it, but every cloud has a silver lining."

The company keeps a certain amount of fence in reserve for such disasters, he says.

#### **FLAT-RATE PRICING**

As a general rule, Cal-State charges a flat rate for fencing for a specific rental period. That rate usually covers up to 200 feet of fencing; after that, volume discounts apply. If a customer needs fencing for longer than expected, the company charges 15 percent of the original installation costs every month beyond the time specified in the contract.

"The initial cost of fence now is so high – for fence, posts, gates, etc. – compared to what you can rent it out for, that you need to have it out there a couple years to get a return on your investment," he says. "Our prices should be two or three times higher than what they are currently ... that's how competitive it is out here among big site-services companies."

Rising steel prices have further squeezed profit margins, he says, pointing out that in 1990, he was paying 20 cents per lineal foot, compared to about \$1.80 now. Moreover, cost-conscious, recession-battered customers are more prone to price shopping now than ever before.

"There are still a small percentage of

*(continued)*



Eric Giffin moves a PolyJohn Enterprises Bravo handwash station in the company yard. Five Peaks Technology restrooms are in the background.

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## New Products Drive Efficiency

Contractors who offer temporary fencing and those that exclusively offer portable sanitation face different business challenges, but they both benefit from investing in new technology. For example, Cal-State Site Services Inc. in Simi Valley, Calif., boosted profitability and productivity by using pneumatic post drivers instead of manual post pounders.

The company owns 10 Kittyhawk pneumatic drivers, made by Hawk Industries Inc., which are more efficient than the post pounders, heavy pieces of pipe with a weight on one end that workers lift up and drop atop a post to drive it into the ground, owner Rick Modlin says.

One crew of two workers equipped with Kittyhawks can install 2,500 to 3,000 feet of post-driven fence in one day.

"It might take 12 to 14 hours, but we can finish a job in one day with our pneumatic Kittyhawk drivers," he says. "To do an equivalent job by hand would run into a second day on the job. In addition, they decrease the risk of workers' compensation injuries."

The company also owns 10 medium-duty, midsize trucks: three Freightliner M2 series and seven International DT466s. The latter feature 24-foot beds, diesel engines for better fuel economy and gross vehicle weights of 25,000 pounds, which exempt them from special licensing requirements. In addition, to create more cargo space on the truck bed, they carry under-chassis air compressors that drive the pneumatic post drivers.



Worker Heriberto Chavez uses a Kittyhawk pneumatic hammer to install a fence post on a construction site.

people who care about service, but most won't pay 20 cents more per foot for that," he says.

Modlin says the key to achieving a quicker return on investment is obtaining many short-term rentals, such as for special events, which because of the pricing structure generate more revenue than the company's long-term rentals.

"Diversifying into temporary fencing may not work for some restroom operators because raw steel is so expensive right now," Modlin says. "In the portable restroom industry, it's not unusual to pay off the cost of restrooms and start earning a profit on them within four or five months.

"With temporary fencing, and steel prices as high as they are, it might take two years to make a profit ... unless you have jobs with quick turnaround of inventory," he says. "If you don't have a lot of competitors, you might be able to make it work, especially if your focus is special events."

### QUAKE FORCED CHANGES

While the earthquake made Cal-State a major player in the region, it also dramatically shifted the company's business dynamics. Exponential inventory growth created extra pressure to get fencing out in the field and generating revenue, and that pressure only increased as construction business fell off during the recession.

"It's all about volume now," Modlin says. "The reality is that as things have gotten tight, prices have fallen ... so it's about a lot of expo-

sure, a large percentage of market share. We can't survive on 100 jobsites – we need 2,000 jobsites.

"We're down to 1,600 jobsites now," he continues. "At our peak, about 2,200 would be normal. Volume is critical to

weathering the slower times. We still have positive cash flow and no layoffs ... we can control overtime to manage our labor costs and keep the company profitable."

During the last 10 years, Cal-State underwent another shift, this time in the type of fencing it uses. Responding to market demand, the company invested more in free-standing, 10-foot-long fence panels, which now generate 50 percent of its business, Modlin says. The company buys all its fencing from Swan Fence Inc.

Crews can erect free-standing fence faster than post-mounted fencing, but that advantage is offset by the fact that trucks can carry only about 1,500 feet of free-standing panels compared to 5,000 feet of rolled fencing. As such, it requires three trucks and three crews to erect an equivalent amount of free-standing fencing, Modlin says.

"We charge more for panels because they cost more and require more labor on site," he explains.

The application or customer preference drives what type of fence is used. Post-driven fence is more secure; free-standing panels are more popular for special events where security isn't as much of an issue.

### COMPETITIVE PRICING

Like the situation faced by so many traditional portable sanitation companies, Cal-State's biggest challenge remains low-ball pricing from competitors, making customer service even more critical than usual, Modlin says.

"There's so much money being left on the table, it's just ridiculous," he notes. "The only way to combat it is to provide the best possible service you can give. Everyone says they provide great service, but you really have to offer the best service possible. These days, there's no margin for error.

"Our philosophy is on site, on time, every time," he says, echoing a common strategy employed by many PROs these days. "If we say something is going to happen at a certain time, we make it happen. We all have about the same prices, so it's the only way we can differentiate ourselves."

Overall, Modlin remains optimistic about the future of his company, particularly as it expands further into portable sanitation.

"I think the restrooms will go just as well as the fencing did," he says. "We're establishing ourselves at a great time. When things pick up, we'll be well established and ready to take it to the next level." ■

### TO LEARN MORE ABOUT Cal-State Site Services

check out a video about the company at  
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By Ed Wodalski

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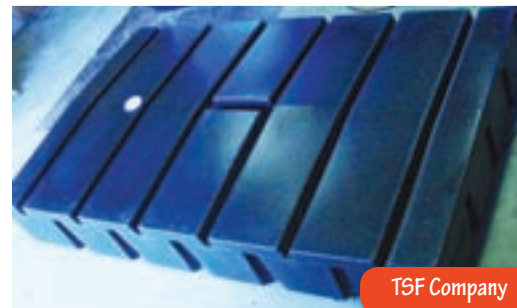


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## ON LOCATION


THE PRO: A-1 Evans Septic Tank Service

THE JOB: Souris River Flood

LOCATION: Minot, N.D.

# DISASTER IN MINOT

By Betty Dageforde



Technician Brenton Berdahl pumps a bank of restrooms in flood-ravaged Minot, N.D. His truck carries a slide-in vacuum unit from Imperial Industries Inc. (Photos by Carter Matson)

## WHEN THE FLOODWATERS OF THE SOURIS RIVER OVERTOOK THIS NORTH DAKOTA CITY, A-1 EVANS SEPTIC TANK SERVICE JUMPED IN TO PROVIDE NEEDED SANITATION RELIEF

### THE TEAM

Sandon Varty, owner of A-1 Evans Septic Tank Service in Minot, N.D., works with a full-time staff of eight. When needed, he brings in a couple of his neighbors – farmers and ranchers – to help out. The company also does septic work, and everyone is cross-trained, including office manager Sheila Moffatt. Varty's cousin, Carson Varty, oversees the portable sanitation crew. Their shop and yard are in an industrial park, and a site is being readied for new offices as they've outgrown their home office.

### COMPANY HISTORY

In 2000 Varty and his brother, Vegas, bought an existing septic/portable restroom company. The business grew and over the last four years they started bringing on employees. Three years ago, Varty bought out his brother, and in June 2011 took on a new partner, Marty Wahus, who got a baptism by fire coming on-

board when the Souris River flooded.

Today half the company's business is portable restrooms. They carry more than 500 units, with 200 more expected by the end of the busy season. Their service territory extends to a 250-mile radius of Minot.

### MAKING CONNECTIONS

Varty was contacted in early June as the river started to rise. The call came from the National Guard, which had worked with the company in the past for training exercises. It turned out to be a false alarm, but as a preemptive move Varty quickly bought a semi load of Satellite Industries Inc. units. The company was just getting into the busy part of its season when the flood came a few weeks later. Varty quickly changed direction from providing units for special events, construction and oilfield work to ensuring the city had sufficient basic sanitation.

### THE MAIN EVENT

The Souris River flows south from Saskatchewan, Canada, into North Dakota, then runs back into Canada. That southerly dip has occasionally caused havoc for North Dakotans along the river, most recently this June, when dams, dikes and reservoirs could not hold the water back after heavy rainfall added to spring snowmelt.

On Tuesday, June 21, over a quarter of the 41,000 residents of Minot were told to evacuate, most for a second time in a month. Despite heroic efforts to protect property, as the week unfolded, residents watched helplessly as the river slowly took over. By Thursday a major north-south artery in town was inundated and closed. Friday, the 1881 high-water record was broken. Sunday the water crested.

It was another week before the river receded enough for the first residents to return to their homes and survey damage. By the

(continued)

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Above and inset, technician Carson Varty delivers a Five Peaks Technology restroom to a flood victim's house.

**“WE MIGHT FIND (LOST RESTROOMS) SOMEWHERE, AND THEY MAY BE WORTH SAVING, BUT WE WERE IN A ‘SAVE LIFE, DON’T WORRY ABOUT PROPERTY’ SITUATION.”**

Sandon Varty



### **HITTING CLOSE TO HOME**

A-1 Evans was not in a section of town under mandatory evacuation orders but Varty felt it would be prudent to move his assets to a safer location. A local construction company allowed him to store his equipment in their yard.

“It was the busiest time in our history but

we felt we had to do it to ensure we’d be able to continue doing business as usual,” Varty explains. “For us it was inconvenient at most compared to what other people had to go through.”

Although the flood did not damage his property, he was unable to access it for more than a week because of impassable roads.

### **THE JOB**

In addition to providing portable restrooms, the company was engaged in pumping out the RV trailers evacuees were living in. And as the recovery work began they were involved in the cleanup effort, pumping out basements – a process that must be done slowly to avoid

structural collapse. Besides river water, basements were filled with sewage. Residents had been advised to plug their sewer drains, but many of those plugs failed due to enormous pressure built up in the system.

### **BY THE NUMBERS**

By the first week in July, A-1 Evans placed more than 250 units related to the flood. Most were aqua Satellite Industries Tufways, with a few Aspens from Five Peaks Technology. Four Satellite Industries wheelchair-accessible Liberty units were provided for the FEMA registration site, an assisted living facility (as a precaution) and at the hospital.

The company also supplied 15 Satellite hand-wash stations to FEMA and the national service companies that started arriving in town for the cleanup work.

The company also utilizes about 20 insulated trailers its workers build, starting with American Hauler trailers from Prairie Truck & Equipment in Minot, and adding toilet/holding tank units and corner sinks from Satellite.

### **LET’S ROLL**

A-1 Evans began deploying units as soon as the flood hit. They were delivered to numerous locations using 8-, 10- and 12-unit trailers

*(continued)*

middle of July, residents in the lowest part of the valley still hadn’t been allowed back. The mayor forecast that as many as 800 of the 4,100 affected structures would have to be rebuilt.

Returning residents found basements flooded and drywall, carpets, appliances and personal belongings damaged beyond repair – along with muck, mold and stench. The citizens of Minot pitched in wherever they could. Many rented out spare rooms, garages and RVs. The National Guard, the Red Cross and Federal Emergency Management Agency also were there to help.

Parts of the city’s water and sewer infrastructure collapsed, creating a huge need for portable sanitation.



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built by Varty's crew. The National Guard used 75 units for 500 troops. FEMA set some up at its evacuation centers. A commercial landlord ordered 50 for the shopping center, apartment buildings and business plazas it manages. The hospital requested about 20 for its clinics and offices. Individuals and businesses needed units due to the failure of parts of the city's sewage treatment system, affecting even those who weren't evacuated.

As the water started to withdraw, the city ordered restrooms to be placed strategically in neighborhoods for residents who began cleanup work.

A-1 Evans uses a software program it created to track units and routes. By early July, seven units were unaccounted for – not surprising considering the devastation. "We might find them somewhere," Varty says, "and they may be worth saving, but we were in a 'save life,

don't worry about property' situation."

### KEEPIN' IT CLEAN

Units in high traffic areas were cleaned daily, others every day or two. All the company's vehicles were used to handle the load – a 2009 Chevy 3500 with a 400-gallon waste/200-gallon freshwater aluminum Brenner Tank LLC tank and Masport pump; a 2007 Dodge 3500 with a 500-gallon steel tank for waste and a 400-gallon aluminum tank for freshwater from Central Machining & Pump Repair in Minot with a Masport pump; a 2006 Chevy 2500 with a 250-gallon waste/150-gallon freshwater Imperial Industries Inc. slide-in steel tank with a Jurop pump; and a 2006 Ford F 350 with a 250-gallon waste/150-gallon freshwater steel tank custom built by a friend of Varty's.

Access to units was often difficult as roads were flooded. "One day it took us three hours to go 10 miles," Varty recalls. But through trial and error they quickly figured out the most accessible routes. With 12 of the community's 27 lift stations down, normal disposal of waste was not possible. "With the city's permission, and due to the dire straits, we've been dumping directly into the lagoons at the sewage treatment facility," Varty says.



A-1 Evans builds these insulated single-unit restroom trailers, starting with the enclosed American Hauler trailer and adding a Satellite Industries toilet/holding tank and corner hand-wash sink.

### NO END IN SIGHT

The crews at A-1 Evans worked seven days a week, 14 to 16 hours a day, all hands on deck. "A lot was asked of the employees and they all stepped up and did what they were asked to do," Varty says. "It was quite a challenge when the flood came, but when everybody did their part, it went as smooth as it could have."

The work will continue indefinitely as residents clean out, restore, and rebuild homes and schools, and as the city repairs streets and water lines. "I fully expect a year to two years of flood-related work," Varty says. ■

**"A LOT WAS ASKED OF THE EMPLOYEES AND THEY ALL STEPPED UP AND DID WHAT THEY WERE ASKED TO DO. IT WAS QUITE A CHALLENGE WHEN THE FLOOD CAME, BUT WHEN EVERYBODY DID THEIR PART, IT WENT AS SMOOTH AS IT COULD HAVE."**

**Sandon Varty**

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The A-1 Evans team includes (left to right) Sandon "Dude" Varty, Sheila Moffatt, Carson Varty, Chase Peterson and Marty Wahus.



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# Customers For Life

**HERE'S A PROVEN APPROACH TO BUILDING A SERVICE PROGRAM THAT WINS CUSTOMERS' LOYALTY AND KEEPS THEM COMING BACK**

By Donald MacDonald

**A**n old story says there's a simple reason the railroads failed years ago: They thought they were in the railroad business – when really they were in the transportation business. What business is your company in?

The truth is that, no matter what kind of work your company does, you're in the service business. To recognize that is to take the first step toward superior customer service – the kind that will bring you customers for life.

We're all experts in customer service because we are all customers. We've bought cars, had haircuts, stopped at restaurants and hired plumbers. We know the difference between companies that treat us right and companies that don't. We need to apply that knowledge to our own service businesses.

## KNOWING THE SECRET

What's the value of a customer? Or, more to the point, what's the value of a customer for life? My brother-in-law, an electrician, began working for a major store chain in its formative years. Forty years later, that chain is still his customer. His firm has wired their stores all over the country. His son is now taking over the account. Just imagine what that one customer has been worth.

There's a secret to providing service that creates customers for life: Treat customers as if they were friends. Customers are just like anyone else. They appreciate a friendly voice on the phone, a warm handshake, someone who calls them by name and makes them feel important.

Friendship is nothing more than somebody giving and somebody taking. As long as that equation is balanced, you're friends for life. But the minute you start taking more than you're giving, the friendship will soon be over. Here are some keys to building those valuable, lasting business friendships.

**Start from the inside.** Quality customer service depends on your employees: They won't respect your customers unless *you* respect *them*. One way to show respect (not the only way) is to pay employees wages and benefits that reflect their value. Well paid employees will have good feelings for your company, and those feelings will translate to their relationships with customers.

Remember these words of wisdom from German inventor and industrialist Robert Bosch: "I don't pay good wages because I make a lot of money. I make a lot of money because I pay good wages."

**Keep your game face on.** If you want your employees to be motivated, you have to be motivated yourself. Have you ever watched two people warming up to play tennis, then observed how the intensity changes when they start playing the match for real and keep score? What happens in your company? Do you spend all day just warming up

**ALL CUSTOMERS WANT AND EXPECT IS SUPERIOR SERVICE. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE GIVE IT TO THEM. OTHERWISE, OUR COMPETITORS WILL.**

and hitting balls back and forth? Or do you keep score and play for real?

Start by acting as if your company provides the world's greatest service – because unless you believe it, it's not going to happen. Are you excited about the work your team produces? Show your excitement. Your employees will know your attitude just by the way you show up for work, walk into a room or speak on the phone.

Another way to show you're playing for real is to measure and reward performance. Measurement motivates people. Establish clear measurements and tie them to rewards. It's a business axiom that what gets rewarded gets repeated. You cannot manage if you are not measuring.

**Learn to listen.** Customers buy good feelings and solutions to their problems. Above all, they want to know that the person dealing with them is listening. The better you know the customer, the better you can respond to their needs.

Let the customer talk. Don't assume you know what the customer wants. Resist the temptation to jump in with an answer. Concentrate on what the customer is really saying. The tone of voice and body language will tell you a great deal about how the person feels. Find out the customer's needs by asking the five basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? When talking to the customer, refer to them by name.

**Take the word "No" out of your vocabulary.** Customers hate to hear the word "No." Of course, you can't give customers everything they want, but talk in terms of what you *can* do, not what you *can't* do. Appreciate the power of "Yes."

## When Things Go Wrong

No company is perfect; many jobs have pitfalls. The best contractors will make mistakes. When things do go wrong, customers will forgive you if you recover well.

Don't make excuses or look for someone to blame. The customer only wants the problem fixed. He wants to feel better after having dealt with you or anyone on your team. When bad things happen, remember:

- S**incere apology.
- E**mergency response.
- R**espect the customer.
- V**olunteer a solution.
- I**mprove procedures.
- C**ustomer wins.
- E**ncourage feedback.

– Donald MacDonald

Remember that the customer may not always be right – but that the customer must always win.

Give customers more than they expect when they call. Think of what you can give that the customer can't get anywhere else. One example: Clean up thoroughly after you finish the job. Many service providers don't do that. If you do, the customer's perception of quality in your work will be elevated.

**Mind the little things.** It's not just the big, successful job or the lower-than-expected price that makes loyal customers. People notice the small personal touches – because most companies don't bother with them. Commit to doing the little things that make the big things happen.

Send thank-you notes after you finish a job. Meet a good customer for lunch or coffee. Remember birthdays, anniversaries and other special events. If your customer is a business owner, surprise them with a referral to a prospective client. Actions like these are the essence of a long-term relationship.

**Encourage feedback.** That means for good or ill. The unhappy customer who complains can be your best friend. Most people, if dissatisfied, will simply choose another company next time. Those who tell you they're unhappy are giving you a chance to redeem yourself. In the end, they may remember you more for the way you handled their complaint than for the mistake you made.

What's more, complaints can tip you off to things about your business that need to be corrected – so you can prevent dissatisfaction in the future.

**Make a plan.** Long-term customers don't appear by magic. They are built through sustained effort. Take a look at your organization through the eyes of a customer. Check the cleanliness of your vehicles and your employees' uniforms. Listen to the way the office people answer the phones and converse with customers. Take what you learn and create an action plan for keeping customers for life. Your plan might include:

- Hiring people who have a service attitude.
- Making every decision with the customer in mind.
- Empowering your employees to do the right thing for customers.
- Continuously reviewing your performance and asking how you can do better.
- Making customer service an agenda item at every team meeting.
- Making sure employees are well trained before they interact with customers.

When all else fails, remember the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's the ultimate secret to building customers for life.

*Donald MacDonald is founder and president of A Corp/Rooter-man, a franchiser of drain cleaning and plumbing services based in Billerica, Mass. ■*





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*Bob Carlson is owner of Glendale Welding in Glendale, Ariz. His company has been building and repairing portable sanitation trucks for 40 years. Send questions for Carlson to truckcorner@promonthly.com.*



# The Mystery of the Lost Vacuum

**REPEATED FAILURE OF A NEW PUMP SYSTEM HAS WRITER STUMPED. SO HE PULLS INTO THE TRUCK CORNER FOR HELP.**

By Bob Carlson

## QUESTION:

We had a mechanic put a new pump on our vacuum truck. It ran for a few hours and then the check valve inside the pump broke. We took it back and he reported it was most likely a faulty pump part. So he replaced the check valve and we went back to work. It wasn't long afterward that exactly the same thing happened and the part broke. We started to doubt the mechanic's ability. What do you think is going on here?

**Richard Riley**  
Lake Havasu City, Ariz.

## ANSWER:

When these kinds of problems occur, it is because the rpms on the pump are set too high or too low; more often than not, too high. The check valve is a protective device inside the pump to hold the vacuum once the pump is turned off. When the check valve breaks, it is allowed to spin and the vacuum is released rendering the pump useless.

## TWO WEEKS LATER

## QUESTION:

We had the mechanic double-check his rpms on the pump and it was running "hot" as he said. He reduced the rpms and installed a new check valve. All appeared to be well, but upon using the truck again, we had more problems. Whenever we stopped running the PTO, which operated the pump, we could hear a noise and the amount of vacuum was slowly dropping without any valves for suction or elsewhere being open. Normally, our mechanic is pretty good, but this last month he's been on a roll. What do you think?

## ANSWER:

If you have solved the check valve problem, there are two remaining places where the vacuum could be leaking. One is the vacuum relief valve. If it is stuck in the open position, you will not retain vacuum for long. So check if your vacuum relief valve is fully operational and doing what it is supposed to do. It should only be opening when the vacuum in your tank has reached a preset level (we usually recommend around 20 to 22 inches of mercury).

If your vacuum relief valve is operating properly, we must look at your mechanic's work. To replace the check valve, he had to remove at least one of the pump's end plates. When replacing the end plate, he had to again seal the end plate(s) with the gasket. A gasket that has been

**YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE TO GET INSIDE YOUR PUMP OFTEN, BUT THESE SIMPLE CHECKS CAN SAVE YOU TIME, MONEY AND FRUSTRATION. THE VACUUM PUMP IS THE HEART OF YOUR TRUCK; TAKE CARE OF IT.**

damaged or isn't sealing properly will allow vacuum leaks.

Whenever you open a pump to check interior parts, always check the condition of the end plate gaskets. Over time, they can deteriorate and lose their shape. When this happens, they are not going to provide the proper seal to efficiently operate your pump.

It makes sense to have extra gaskets on hand, as well as a rebuild kit. It is relatively easy to maintain your own pump. The basic rebuild kit consists of a set of vanes, bearings and gaskets. Each kit is specifically designed for the pump, so make sure you order the appropriate kit.

## PUMP CHECKLIST

Whenever opening a pump, check the condition of the following:

- The rotor. This is the main shaft holding the vanes. It is held in place by the bearings. If you wait too long to change your bearings, the ends of the shaft can slowly wear down.
- The vanes. Over time, these also will wear down and create less vacuum.
- The bearings. You'll recognize the sound of your pump changing slightly when the bearings begin to go.
- The gaskets. Check for warping or losing their shape in any other way.
- The interior of the pump. Visually inspect the cleanliness and the condition of the cylinder where the vanes rotate. This area should be free of debris and if it has received the proper oiling every day, should show little wear. Any discoloration is a sign of possible trouble. Any debris within the cylinder indicates that something is happening between the primary and secondary. Perhaps the secondary hasn't been emptied before operating the pump each day.

## THE HEART OF YOUR TRUCK

You shouldn't have to get inside your pump often, but these simple checks can save you time, money and frustration. The vacuum pump is the heart of your truck; take care of it. ■

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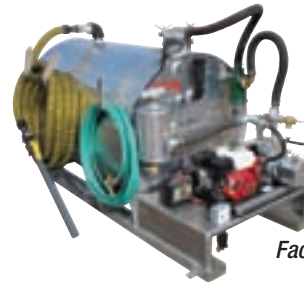
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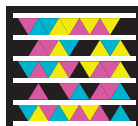
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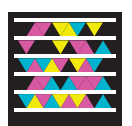
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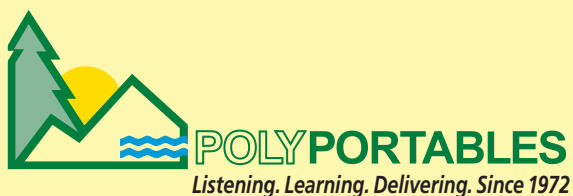
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