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On the Money

Growing professionalism, modern rigs
give a boost to California's A-Throne

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On Location: Fueled For Success

Aardvark Tidy Toilets keeps the pedal to the metal to provide green-light service at the NHRA drag racing championship.

- Betty Dageforde

ON THE COVER: Steve (left) and Brent Johnson take a break during the NHRA U.S. Nationals drag racing event for a photo in front of an event banner at Lucas Oil Raceway in Indianapolis. Brent manages Aardvark Tidy Toilets for his aunt, Michele Johnson, who owns the company. Steve is operations manager and Michele's husband. (Photo by Doug McSchooler)

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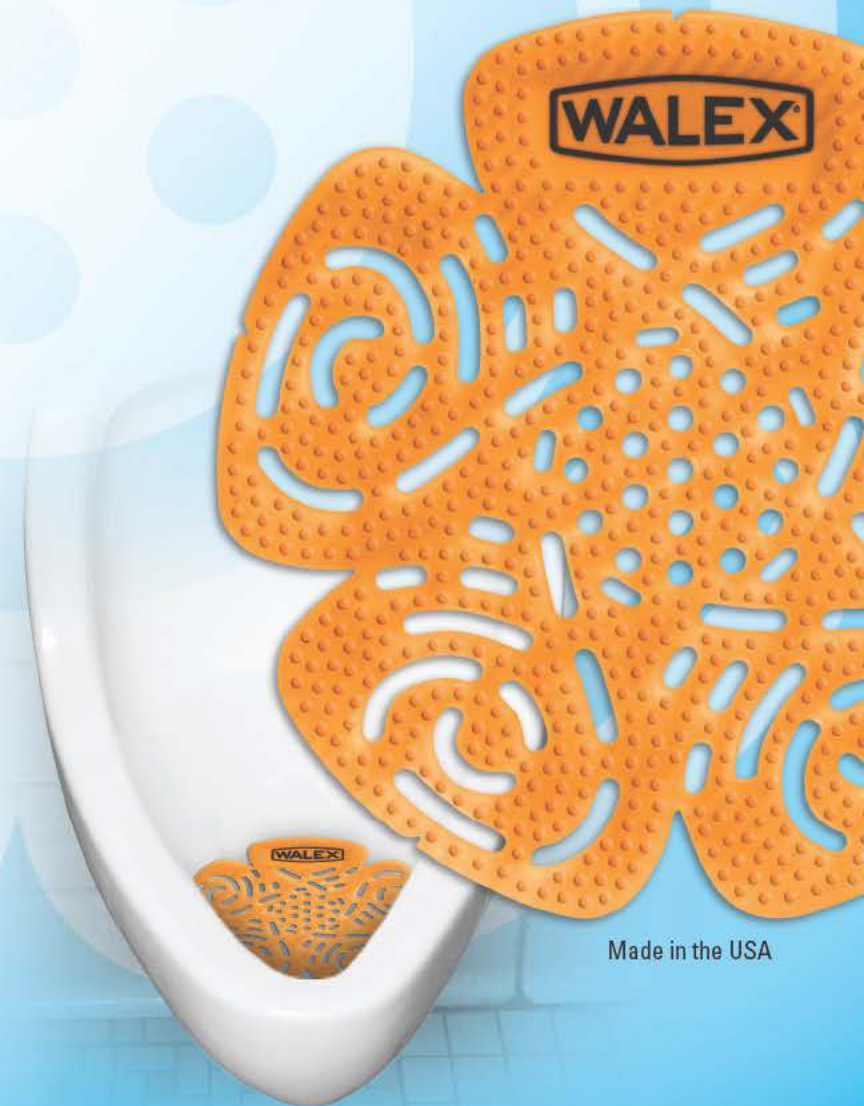
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Show and Tell

To kick-start a new effort to build brand loyalty, an Internet entrepreneur offers up an age-old marketing ploy

By Jim Kneiszel

You're familiar the old adage, "Everything old is new again." That's what came to mind when I heard a popular marketing blogger suggest a decidedly antique promotional tool for use by his followers who – for the most part – are looking to advance Internet business startups.

Pat Flynn, a new media entrepreneur, added a recent podcast at his www.smartpassiveincome.com website – which I found while noodling around on iTunes for some late-night chatter – with an intriguing title: "Brand loyalty and a 19th century strategy you can use to get it."

So what does Flynn say could be used to sell everything from toasters to technology advice? The *factory tour*. That's right, he suggests throwing open your doors and giving anyone a step-by-step look at how you perform your job. While it's an old concept, Flynn argues that online technology lets businesses implement the idea of a factory tour in new ways ... and at little cost. I think the idea translates well to portable sanitation providers.

CULTIVATING LOYAL CUSTOMERS

Brand loyalty is critical, Flynn says, because it builds a base of your best customers, those with an unshakable support for your company. In the portable sanitation world, that means the customers who won't be wooed away from your service by a newcomer offering to deliver a restroom for 20, 30 or even 50 percent of the price you're charging. Your most loyal customers don't buy into the low-price argument.

"That's the ultimate in marketing. When you have people who are loyal to your brand, you have it made," Flynn says. "Who cares what the competition is doing? (Loyal customers) naturally become part of your marketing team. They're going to help sell for you because they love what you do; they're excited about you and are going to tell others."

In portable sanitation, you gain loyalty by providing quality, well-maintained products and servicing the heck out of them. Customers like the attention they're given by your crews and have a positive experience time after time.

In portable sanitation, you gain loyalty by providing quality, well-maintained products and servicing the heck out of them. Customers like the attention they're given by your crews and have a positive experience time after time. So how do you capitalize on that hard-fought reputation? How do you show others the value proposition you present? That's where the factory tour concept comes in.

WAY BACK WHEN

Flynn explains that factory tours became popular in the 1800s, as large companies like ketchup maker Heinz organized the first tours of their manufacturing facilities. Visitors were fascinated to see how products were made on a large scale and these tours became a popular form of entertainment for families.

"Before the public had access, this behind-the-scenes stuff was available only to potential investors and dignitaries. It became a huge craze," Flynn says. "Everyone was fascinated to see how things worked."

Flynn argues it's the same today, as Americans tap into television shows like "How Stuff Works", taking viewers through hundreds of manufacturing processes in careful detail. The blogger related his own experience touring a chocolate factory where he lived, and then instinctively seeking out that brand of chocolate when hit with a sweet tooth. He said the tour showed him the care workers showed for the product and a tasting that was part of the tour reinforced the quality of the product.



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HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO YOU?

You're not selling candy bars, but there are logical ways you could work the factory tour idea to promote your products and services in a way that builds brand loyalty. Rather than suggest you literally open your yard to anyone who might want to inspect your service trucks or climb aboard one of your restroom trailers, I'll focus in on using YouTube videos posted on your website to bring visitors into your world.

In addition to simply posting words and photography showing the variety of restrooms products you carry, I'm a fan of bringing your website to life with photos of your crew, testimonials from your customers and video commercials. More and more PROs are also turning to social media to further personalize the company, doing things like posting photos from special events they serve or promoting a local charitable cause.

Those are great initiatives, but here are a few ideas for creating videos that provide a virtual factory tour of your business – ways to add a dimension to your marketing that make you stand out from the competition.

Explain how you got started.

When you take a traditional factory tour, a guide usually stops in front of an important symbol of the company, say a wagon full of beer kegs at a brewery tour, and weaves an interesting tale about how the company got started. Every PRO has a similar story to tell; maybe yours is a three-generation company started on your grandfather's kitchen table that's grown to serve hundreds of customers in your hometown. That's an easy story to tell in a video format and a great way to begin the factory tour. Choose an interesting backdrop for the video and use the occasion to introduce viewers to key members of your crew.

Show the craftsmanship of the products.

Today's wide range of portable sanitation equipment is impressive to look at and often has capabilities to surprise and delight users. Too bad many people have a lingering impression of that one miserable experience with a filthy, worn-out restroom they used at the county fair. Create a video that builds a better image of the equipment you use. Show the features of everything from your standard restroom and hand-wash stations to your VIP restroom or shower trailers. Walk around one of your clean service vehicles and make customers comfortable with the rig and technician that will be showing up at their backyard party or special event. Let people know that no matter their impression of portable sanitation, you are offering modern, well-cared-for facilities they would be happy to use.

Share your service techniques.

Make a video showing how a restroom is delivered and set up, serviced, and removed after the customer no longer needs it. Put your top technician in a well-pressed uniform, make sure he or she is outfitted with all the proper safety gear, and then demonstrate, step-by-step, your thorough service protocol. This will give customers the assurance that your units are impeccably clean and that you are concerned with health and safety. Sometimes I think the public doesn't always get the full picture showing the quality of service and cleanliness PROs provide on a job site. This is a way to reinforce that message. And the service video provides a second benefit: You can show it to new employees as a training video on how the work is done to your satisfaction.

Demonstrate how technology helps you.

Part of any good factory tour is a point where you are shown how manufacturing processes have improved over time, making products better and safer, and companies more efficient. You can do the same

through a video. Show how service trucks and restroom equipment are tracked through GPS technology. Explain how you control odors with pump exhaust scent products or advanced deodorant formulations. Go through your automated billing process to show how simple it is to work with your company. Bookend the information about your interesting past with the message that you always have an eye toward the future.

A FINAL WORD

Seeing is believing, and when prospective customers see your products and services in action, they'll be more likely to hire you again and less likely to turn to another contractor they don't feel like they know. And that's the power of brand loyalty. ■

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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.



Preparing for Health Care Reform

Portions of the Affordable Care Act have gone into effect. Other parts will be implemented over the next few years and may impact your small business.

By Judy Kneiszel

The Affordable Care Act was passed by Congress and then signed into law by the President on March 23, 2010. It was upheld by the Supreme Court, and has started going into effect. I'll be the first to admit I did not read the more than 2,000 pages of the law. I'm willing to bet you didn't either. But now that some of it has been implemented and other parts are scheduled to go into effect, it's time to explore what it means for your small business.

FEWER THAN 50 EMPLOYEES?

Businesses with fewer than 50 employees are not required to provide health insurance for their workers. If you have fewer than 50 employees, don't provide insurance already and don't intend to, then the mandate that every American have health insurance by 2014 must be met by your

individual employees, not your company. Your uninsured employees will have to purchase health insurance or pay a penalty. Depending on their income level, they may be eligible for Medicaid or qualify for subsidies from the government to help them purchase coverage.

FEWER THAN 25 EMPLOYEES?

Of course 25 is fewer than 50, so again, you don't have to provide health insurance. But if you have fewer than 25 employees and the average annual wages you pay are less than \$50,000, you might consider providing health insurance. If you do, you can qualify for a small business tax credit of up to 35 percent to offset the portion of the health insurance premiums you pay. And starting in 2014, that small business tax credit goes up to 50 percent. A tax credit is an amount subtracted from the amount of income tax owed.

MORE THAN 50 EMPLOYEES?

Companies with more than 50 full-time employees or the equivalent must provide health insurance for workers or risk penalties. Most of them - 94 percent according to the Kaiser Family Foundation - already do. The remaining 6 percent of companies with more than 50 employees that do not provide insurance, will have to start or they will be assessed an annual penalty of \$2,000 for every employee in the company. The first 30 employees, however, are not counted when calculating the penalty. That means an employer with 70 employees would pay a penalty for 40 workers, or \$80,000.

WHERE DO I SHOP FOR HEALTH INSURANCE?

Beginning in 2014, health insurance will be available to individuals and small businesses through state-run exchanges. This will require insurance companies to compete for business in the marketplace. If your state has decided not to establish its own health insurance exchange marketplaces, you can utilize a federal exchange.

The exchange program for small businesses, called Small Business Health Options Program (SHOP), will allow small businesses to pool together to increase purchasing power. This is intended to bring rates for small businesses in line with those available to large corporations.

The health insurance plans available in the SHOP will be run by private health insurance companies like small group plans are run now. Cost and coverage information will be presented in a standard format so price, coverage, quality and other features of the plans can be compared.

SHOP will be available to small businesses with up to 100 employees, but states have the option to limit participation to businesses with 50 employees or less until 2016. If a business participating in SHOP grows to have more than 100 employees, it may stay in the program. And starting in 2017, states can choose to allow businesses with more than 100 employees to utilize SHOP.



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Starting in October, you'll be able to get information about all the plans available in your area. You and your employees will be able to enroll through an insurance broker, directly through the website, or by calling a toll-free phone number.

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WHAT IF IT'S JUST YOU?

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, about one in four small business owners are uninsured. Under the new law, self-employed and uncovered individuals will be required to carry health insurance or pay a fine, which the Supreme Court deemed to be a tax.

The size of that tax depends on how many people are in the uninsured's household, and how much they earn. In 2014, the annual penalty will be \$95 per adult and \$47.50 per child, up to a family maximum of \$285, or 1 percent of family income, whichever is greater. In 2015, the penalty increases to \$325 per adult and \$162.50 per child, up to a family maximum of \$975, or 2 percent of family income, whichever is greater. And in 2016, the penalty goes up to \$695 per adult and \$347.50 per child, up to a family maximum of \$2,085, or 2.5 percent of family income, whichever is greater.

Also, small business owners who purchased their own health policy in the past relied on the individual insurance market. That means changes in the individual insurance market brought on by the Affordable Care Act could impact small business owners more than changes in the rules for the small business insurance market. Some of these changes include: guaranteed access to coverage and no premium surcharges for people with pre-existing health conditions, limits on how much premiums can vary by age, a requirement that all insurers cover certain benefits, the creation of health insurance exchanges, and tax credits to make premiums more affordable.

WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE?

You probably read this whole article thinking, "Yeah, but what is this going to cost me?" And now I'm going to disappoint you. There are so many variables for every individual, family and business, there's no one-size-fits-all answer to that question. And the exchanges haven't even started up yet, so insurance premiums are unknown. But, knowing your particular circumstances, you can play around with some of the calculators that are popping up online to get some idea. Search "Affordable Care Act calculator," but keep in mind, nothing is set in stone until real plans are available for comparison shopping in October.

WHERE CAN YOU LEARN MORE?

I still don't think you have to read all 2,000 pages. There are plenty of people who have done that and can sum up the information for you. You'll find readable summaries at:

- <http://healthcare.gov/index.html>
- <http://whitehouse.gov/healthreform/small-business/tax-credit>
- <http://irs.gov/uac/Affordable-Care-Act-Tax-Provisions>
- <http://sba.gov/content/health-care-health-care-reform>

If you are a visual learner, a guy named Jonathan Gruber actually created a comic book about health care reform, and there are lots of YouTube videos reviewing various aspects of the law as well. ■



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THE JOB: NHRA Mac Tools U.S. Nationals Drag Racing Championship

LOCATION: Lucas Oil Raceway at Indianapolis

THE PRO: Aardvark Tidy Toilets

The Aardvark Tidy Toilets team, including (left to right) Jon Lawson, Jason Reynolds, Cody Stevens, Tom Stewart, Brent Johnson, Steve Johnson and Eric Reynolds, poses at the starting line at Lucas Oil Raceway. (Photos by Doug McSchooler) [www](#)



Fueled for SUCCESS

Aardvark Tidy Toilets keeps the pedal to the metal to provide green-light service at the NHRA drag racing championship

BY BETTY DAGEFORD

THE TEAM

Brent Johnson manages Aardvark Tidy Toilets, a division of M.A.S. Markers, a highway reflector installation business owned by his aunt, Michele Johnson. She handles the financial aspects of the business while her husband, Steve Johnson, oversees operations. The shared offices are in Lebanon, Ind., with a shop six miles away at a family farm in Brownsburg, just outside of Indianapolis. Five of the company's 18 employees are devoted to the portable restroom side of the business, but others help out as needed. "It's a nice break for them," Brent Johnson says. "They get to do something different." Depending on the flow of work, six to eight people were on site at all times for the NHRA (National Hot Rod Association) U.S. Nationals drag race.

COMPANY HISTORY

Performing the highway work, M.A.S. Markers came across a traffic control company that had a portable restroom division. "Through a

discussion here and there, we understood they were not interested in it and we thought it was something we could take over and make it grow," Johnson says. Purchased in February 2010, the restroom division has 500 or 600 units and works within a 50-mile radius.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

2011 was the first year the company provided services to the NHRA. Johnson says luck and good timing opened the door for them. "I walked into the maintenance shed one day out of the blue and the operations director just happened to be standing there." It turns out they were looking to make a switch. As a conversation-starter, they talked about mutual friends, then Johnson explained what the company could offer. He thinks their advantage is their size. "We're big enough that we can handle any job, but we're small enough that our customers get some personal interaction with us that they might not get with bigger companies," he says.

(continued)

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THE MAIN EVENT

Wally Parks founded the NHRA in 1951 to get drag racing off city streets and into organized venues. Today, it's the world's largest motor sports sanctioning body with 80,000 members and 5,000 yearly events, the biggest of which is the Labor Day weekend Mac Tools U.S. Nationals at Lucas Oil Raceway in Clermont, Ind., just outside Indianapolis. The sportsmen started racing on Wednesday, the sponsored professionals came in on Friday, with eliminations on Saturday, leading up to the finals normally held on Labor Day, but, in 2012, postponed until the following weekend due to severe weather from the remnants of Hurricane Isaac. An estimated 30,000 to 40,000 were in the stands each day.

THE JOB

The company provided portable restrooms for the event and serviced holding tanks at the ticket plaza, the Red Cross trailer and one of the caterers. But the bulk of their work was pumping out RVs and refilling their freshwater tanks. Contestants and many of the attendees camped out in the fields surrounding the facility. Campers received company flyers with contact information and a grid map so when they called for service they could identify their location. Johnson estimates they serviced about 300 RVs.

BY THE NUMBERS

The company provided 100 dark blue Satellite Industries Taurus restrooms with hand sanitizers and six Satellite Liberty wheelchair-accessible units. Because they service so many events at the venue, units are stored on site. They were placed in about 30 locations — large banks along patron walkways, smaller banks for campers and race teams, five in one of the main parking lots, and 12 in the VIP area.

Three Tuff Jon hand-wash stations from T.S.F. Company, Inc. were used — one in the TV compound and two at the VIP tent.

LET'S ROLL

By Tuesday, stored units were moved into position by the facilities staff. Most were in the same place as the previous year but Johnson drove around



▲▲▲ Brent Johnson connects the vacuum hose to an RV unit on the NHRA U.S. Nationals grounds.

and located them all. The delayed race concluded the following weekend and then the company spent the following two days pumping and cleaning units before they were put back into storage.

KEEPIN' IT CLEAN

Units were serviced once daily — some twice — either at night after the crowds left or in the morning before the gates opened. The crew used two service vehicles — a 2007 International 4200 built out by Progress Tank with a 1,500-gallon waste/500-gallon freshwater aluminum tank, and a 2002 Ford F-450 with a 450-gallon waste/250-gallon freshwater steel tank, both with Masport, Inc. pumps.

Service is a big focus for the company. “We really strive to make sure that when somebody walks into one of our restrooms, they take notice of how clean it is,” Johnson says. And not just the restrooms — they received multiple complements on the look of their vehicles and even the staff, who wears company T-shirts and nice-looking jeans or shorts. These details are important to the NHRA, which owns the facility.

The majority of RV service calls came early in the morning and late at night. The company made every attempt to respond within the hour, which made for a grueling schedule. The friendliness of the customers made it worth the effort, Johnson says. “If you pump somebody out and they don't offer you something to eat or drink, that's an anomaly,” he says.

They used 500-gallon plastic freshwater tanks mounted on a pair of Chevrolet 3500s to provide water for the motorcoaches. There was a welcome lull from noon to 3 p.m. when the team could take a break in the company RV. “Other than Saturday and Sunday when people were just flagging us down left and right,” Johnson explains.



▲▲▲ The best drag racers in the country gather to match horsepower and driving skills at the U.S. Nationals.



“We really strive to make sure that when somebody walks into one of our restrooms, they take notice of how clean it is.”

BRENT JOHNSON

<<< Field service assistants (from left) Jason Reynolds, Tom Stewart and Mark Evans service one of the many Satellite Industries units placed at the NHRA U.S. Nationals racetrack. After storms delayed events on the first scheduled weekend, the track reopened a week later to complete the races.

ENDURANCE TEST

Other than a close call when the debris from the breakup of one of the funny cars nearly wiped out a small bank of restrooms, Johnson says everything went smoothly. He credits facilities manager Bill Gunn and his staff for making the portable sanitation job easier. “My goal for the week is the fewer times I talk to him, the better because that means everything’s going OK. If he doesn’t call me, that means people aren’t calling him.”

“It’s a grind that first day and you know you’ve got six more of them staring you right in the face. You take a deep breath and just plow into it.”

BRENT JOHNSON

This is the company’s biggest event of the year. It’s a tough job — but one they look forward to, admits Johnson. “It’s a grind that first day and you know you’ve got six more of them staring you right in the face,” he says. “You take a deep breath and just plow into it.” ■

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Jeff Wigley is president of the Portable Sanitation Association International and co-owner of Pit Stop Sanitation Services, Inc., in Atlanta. Contact him at 770/439-2888 or by email at wjwigley@bellsouth.net.



When You Provide a Restroom, You Are Helping to Improve and Protect Our World

By Jeff Wigley

There is something we may have forgotten in our business, which is how much we do to improve and protect our world. Why don't we think about it? Because the good we do prevents the bad from happening, and nobody seems to report news until it's bad news.

As operators, we have a responsibility to educate the public about the good we provide to our communities. It is in their best interest to understand that portable restrooms provide personal dignity, increased productivity, and protection from contaminated water and the outbreak of deadly diseases.

When people in our world see our services as important to their personal health and safety, financial stability and enjoyment of the great outdoors, they will appreciate our industry. Until then, we will only be known for that which has little or no long-term effect on their well-being, which is an unfavorable odor.

Remember, the job supervisor who wants a restroom dirt cheap probably has family or friends using your restrooms somewhere else around town. How can you provide excellent service to them, or on his job site, for no profit? And why do they want your service for little or nothing? Because they do not appreciate all the benefits mentioned above.

The most striking example you can give customers about the benefit of our services is what happens after a natural disaster, such as what we saw with Hurricane Sandy and the devastation in Japan last year. Portable restrooms kept those situations from becoming worse. And something bad can happen in any community. If you have a financially healthy business, with the equipment and manpower to respond to a natural disaster, how valuable is that to the community you live in?

Our business is vitally important. How we portray that to our customers is by educating them with the facts. The Portable Sanitation Association International and its members have information you will find useful in spreading the word about our value to the world. My challenge to you, and myself, is to be an educator as well as a service provider to my customers. If we all do our part, we will serve our communities even more, which they should learn to appreciate. ■

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2013 Pumper & Cleaner EXPO

On the CUTTING EDGE

The 33rd annual Pumper & Cleaner Expo offered the latest in tools, technology and training for portable restroom operators

BY JIM KNEISZEL



The famous line from the baseball movie "Field of Dreams," "If you build it, they will come," is appropriate to portable restroom operators who make an annual trip to the Pumper & Cleaner Environmental Expo International.

All the tools, the technology and the training required of any PRO were available at the 33rd annual Expo, held at the Indiana Convention Center in February. Shiny service trucks, a rainbow selection of restrooms of all designs, and key accessories to help PROs get a leg up on competitors were found on the exhibit floor with manufacturer's teams ready to answer questions.

So they came. PROs from across the U.S. and 45 countries were among the 8,418 attendees representing 3,730 companies attending the Expo Education Day and visiting 518 exhibitors. Some portable sanitation contractors who made the trip said they would fall behind the rest of the industry if they skipped a year.

"A lot of the new technology is information that I don't have yet. We get a lot of access to new technology," Tim Kettler of Action Septic Service in Warsaw, Ohio, said. "There are a lot of opportunities for continuing education and it's great that it's all assembled in the same place."

Jon Houseknecht of Sunset Septic Service in La Porte, Ind., agreed. Recently his company expanded into portable sanitation, and the Expo is partly responsible for that.

"We like diversifying and not relying on one particular market. We can see things (at the Expo) that we don't see on a daily basis, and it helps us branch out," Houseknecht said. He especially found Education Day and visiting with vendors to be invaluable exercises.

"In our business, education is the key for growing," he said. "The industry is changing at such a rapid pace, we have to keep up with it."

Some Expo statistics bear repeating and illustrate how important the industry's biggest trade show is for PROs. In 2012, 84 percent of attendees



“We like diversifying and not relying on one particular market. We can see things (at the Expo) that we don’t see on a daily basis, and it helps us branch out.”

JON HOUSEKNECHT

said they purchased or planned to purchase equipment because of what they saw at the Expo. Some 80 educational seminars were conducted during the week. The exhibit hall featured more than 500,000 square feet of space filled with products used in the wastewater industry.

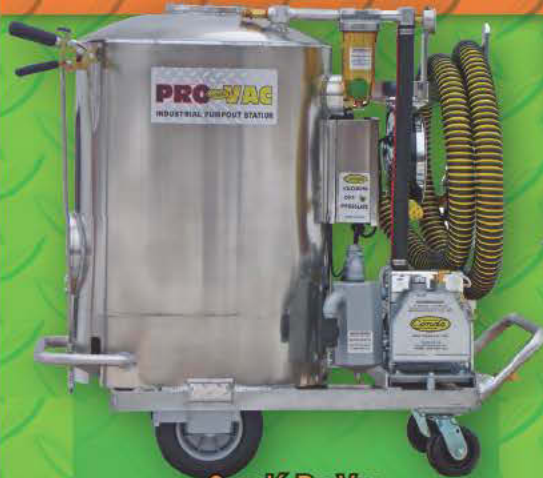
Sunset Septic’s Gale Houseknecht reflected on the major reason her family’s business values the Expo. The trade show gives them a competitive advantage back in their hometown.

“We like to come every year, just to get the latest technology,” she said. “We like to see what’s on the cutting edge so we can bring it back to our business and then introduce it to our customers.”

To get more information about the 2013 Expo, visit www.pumpershow.com, where you’ll find out about exhibitors, view videos recapping the event, and read four issues of the Expo Daily publication distributed at the show. And you can find out how to register and plan your trip to next year’s show, set for Feb. 24-27, 2014, in Indianapolis. ■



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The A-Throne team includes (from left), Angie Moreno, Alex Torres, Francisco Ojeda, Leroy Zion, Edgar Salazar, Alejandra Cardero, Mike Rice, Nikki Hussein, Ricardo Miranda, Larry Hall, Gilton Acevedo, Durrell Wafer, Minerva Songco, Dixie Vane and Michele Chavez. (Photos by Patrick Botz-Forbes) vvv



On the Money

Pinning down cost of service, modernizing equipment and boosting driver professionalism helped California's A-Throne grow from an inventory of a few hundred to several thousand restrooms

BY SEICHE SANDERS

It takes a savvy manager to admit when there are deficiencies in your business – that it's not being run the way you would like it to be – and then to come to the realization that only one person can turn it around: You.

That is exactly what Mike Rice – owner of A-Throne, a portable restroom business based in Long Beach, Calif. – did in 1996, when he and his partner (his father, George) decided to get serious about revamping the image of their then-16-year-old company. They brought in new portable restroom units (and cycled out the old) and worked to get the company's drivers spiffed up and professional.

And voila! The changes worked. The company grew quickly, from about 500 restroom units in 1996 to about 4,000 today. But Rice's accomplishments come with a price.

Rice is challenged daily with an incessant onslaught of new startup or add-on businesses that undercut his prices, causing cost-conscious,

ill-informed customers to jump ship. Often, those same customers return when the competing restroom operators fail or don't offer sufficient service.

A-Throne, Long Beach, Calif.

Owner: Mike Rice

Annual sales: About \$4 million

Employees: 32

Service area: Los Angeles, Orange County and Inland Empire (Riverside & San Bernardino); about a 75-mile radius

Services: Portable restroom rentals and fencing rentals

Affiliations: Portable Sanitation Association International; Long Beach Chamber of Commerce

Website: www.athrone.com



(continued)

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Rice has even coined a term for the frustrating phenomenon - “the passing parade” - and every day makes sure customers understand that a lower price isn’t always a better price.

LOWBALL BATTLES

“Most people just don’t understand the cost of doing business, and so being at this business for over 30 years now, I just call it ‘the passing parade,’” Rice says. “There’s easy entry into the business and we just always have people coming in and finding a way to lowball prices. They take the business away from you, and it’s usually just a matter of time before they’re out of business.”

Rice recalls a car wash down the street that rented a portable restroom from A-Throne. A competitor came in and offered the manager a price that was below A-Throne’s cost to supply and service the unit, so A-Throne gave up the account. Two vendors later, the manager of the car wash called back, saying her unit hadn’t been serviced in nearly three weeks and that the company wouldn’t return her calls.

“And that’s ‘the passing parade,’ ” Rice says. “It seems like when one goes, another one or two come back.”

So what does an established company do to combat a constant turnstile of lowball competitors, lost business and then customers’ eventual return?

It’s not always possible to prevent customers from leaving, especially when they’re leaving for a competitor’s price at which your company wouldn’t even break even. However, professionalism and a consistent, high-value experience are what A-Throne must practice and promote.

“We’ll do anything for anyone, if it’s profitable,” Rice explains. “We’re fortunate that in our area there are a lot of customers. Not all the customers are for us. Sometimes, we’d just rather have someone else lose money on these customers.”

KNOW YOUR COST OF SERVICE

Knowing the cost of service is an essential business strategy, Rice explains. He stays on top of the issue in a few ways.

“Sometimes we’ll take a particular special event or job and cost it out when it’s over to see if we truly understand our costs,” Rice says. “If it’s not profitable - unless it’s a special case - we’re not going to do it.”

There are generally two kinds of lowball companies that spring up, Rice says. It may be a driver who strikes out on his own after managing to put together the capital for a truck. Or it’s the bigger outfits, who use portable restrooms as a loss leader in their service menu. Rice observes that the latter example has been less common in recent years.

“What most people don’t understand when they start a business is that there are going to be problems, accidents and major breakdowns. It’s not a question of if, it’s a question of when,” Rice says.

“To be in business, you need to make a profit or stay home,” he adds.

Yet he admits that knowing if any given job - whether a special event or a construction customer - will be profitable is an inexact science; experience is a big help in that regard.

“From time to time when our competitors quote an absurdly low price, we will share with our customers what our labor cost is, including benefits,

(continued)

On the Fence

Sometimes business opportunities seem to spring up organically. The next thing you know, you’ve added a new service to the menu.

Such was the case when A-Throne’s construction-company customers - which account for 60 percent of the company’s revenue - began to request temporary fencing. Contractors who didn’t want to go to multiple vendors would hire A-Throne for fencing, and initially, owner Mike Rice subcontracted that service.

“That kind of put our reputation in someone else’s hands,” Rice explains. “And if that company didn’t perform, then it was a black eye on us. And that just started happening too many times, so we decided to start doing it ourselves.”

The company now offers construction and special events fencing, which accounts for 15 percent of total business.

Portable restroom operators have lots of room to branch out, Rice says. Beyond renting fence, they can provide temporary power, office trailers, storage containers, drain cleaning and cleaning grease traps.

But, Rice warns, know what you’re getting yourself in to.

“I recommend a lot of caution before you get too spread out,” he says. “The portable restroom business is very personal. I think the reason most trash companies didn’t make it is because they didn’t understand how personal it is. Usually the (container) is placed in the rear of the parking lot and the janitor would empty the trash at the end of the day. Nobody would really notice the cleanliness or odor of the (container).”

Keeping restrooms clean and providing a great experience for the user should be the main goal for restroom companies, Rice asserts. Don’t sacrifice that by spreading yourself out too thin elsewhere.



« Yard worker Larry Hall scrubs a portable restroom before it is delivered.



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Temporary fencing goes hand-in-hand with portable restrooms for A-Throne. Gilton Acevedo is shown working on a fencing panel in the company yard. >>>

direct cost of service equipment, units and trucks, and our indirect expenses,” Rice explains. “By doing this, it helps explain to the customer that, in reality, we’re not overcharging.”

Rice recommends using formulas available through Portable Sanitation Association International to help determine direct costs. “It is only through knowing their cost that they can determine the price to charge to guarantee profitability,” he adds.

RETAINING CUSTOMERS

A-Throne does not hang its hat on rock-bottom prices. On the contrary, Rice says the company’s pricing is on the higher end of the spectrum.

“We charge more than most of our competitors because we are supplying a superior product and service,” Rice explains. Customers who appreciate and recognize those high levels of service are A-Throne’s bread and butter.

Rice admits the economy has made the environment tougher, but he won’t compromise on price. “We sell on the design of the unit, the ventilation, the designs of the tank, the air freshener. We just really push the value.”

Rice shares an example: When Disneyland was building its California Adventure theme park, his company secured the business of one of the many contractors on site. Eventually, because the level of service required by Disney was so strict, all other contractors at the site hired A-Throne to supply and service their portable restrooms as well.

“They were very demanding and we did just what they wanted at a profitable price. What that ended up doing was opening the door to a lot of the larger contractors, which helped us grow.”

MIKE RICE



“In keeping the units clean, responding on time, taking care of graffiti, and just responding when they called,” he explains how the company sought to stand out. “They were very demanding and we did just what they wanted at a profitable price. What that ended up doing was opening the door to a lot of the larger contractors, which helped us grow.”

From the glass-is-half-full perspective, you have an established and successful business if there are a whole host of competitors biting your ankles with lowball prices. Now with 36 employees and thousands of restrooms (mainly from Satellite Industries), and also some units from NuConcepts, Rice recalls his own struggles during A-Throne’s infancy.

“I can remember in the beginning, every single day was very stressful. There would be times I’d be delivering units on Sundays because we didn’t have trucks and men to get the Monday deliveries done. And if there were days when there wasn’t work, I worried how we were going to pay the bills. Over two or three years, I realized that this is how business cycles work.”

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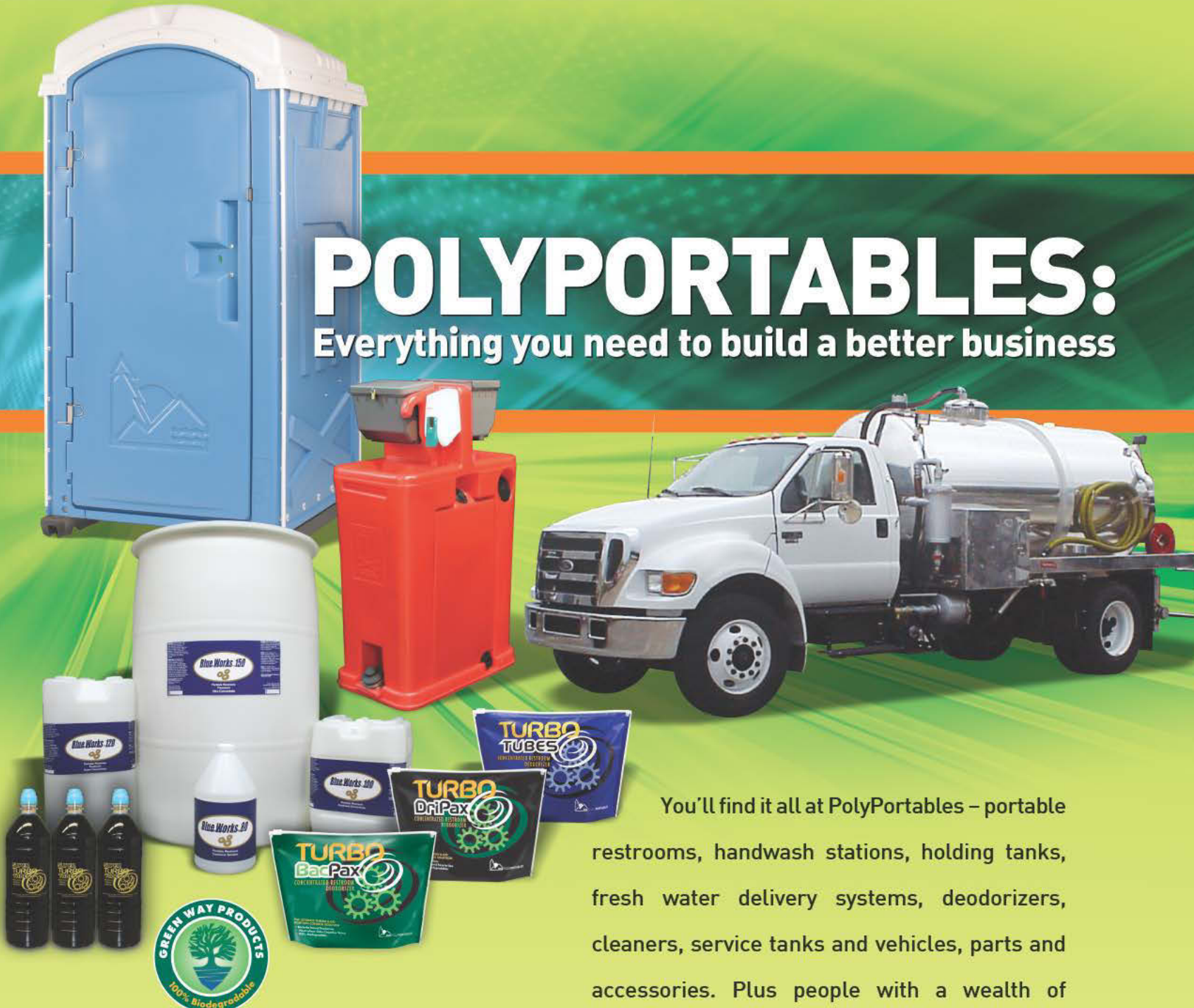
“We got serious about doing things more professionally. The first thing we did was try to clean up our drivers. We put them in uniforms and got our units cleaned up and started replacing inventory with new units.”

MIKE RICE

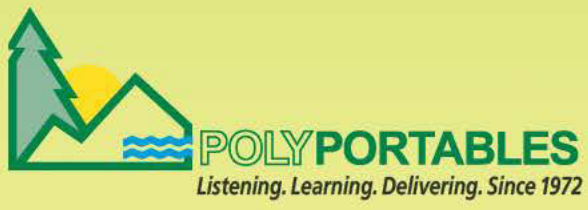
<<< Leroy Zion unloads portable restrooms that have just come in from the field.

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◀◀ Yard workers Francisco Ojeda (left) and Edgar Salazar restock paper products and put the final cleaning touches on several NuConcepts restrooms before sending them out on the job.

A video feature covering products and service techniques used by A-Throne is found online at www.promonthly.com.

BOOSTING PROFESSIONALISM

Having run the company somewhat informally during its first few years, even sprinkling other jobs and ventures into the mix (including truck driving), Rice realized he was ready to make a change when the family sold the restaurant it owned and operated in 1996. He had attended a handful of annual PSAI conventions in the 1980s, but in 1996, he went to the Pumper & Cleaner Environmental Expo International and made contacts that convinced him to go to both shows.

“And I really started learning,” Rice explains. “The PSAI was a lot about image – they’re very image-conscious – and we kind of had an image problem. Our units were old and they weren’t always cleaned the best.”

Rice leaned heavily on PSAI for networking and advice, and even went on to become president of the association in 2004. “We got serious about doing things more professionally. The first thing we did was try to clean up our drivers. We put them in uniforms and got our units cleaned up and started replacing inventory with new units.”

The company first automated its systems in 1989 with a DOS-based program call GMF. Later, the company updated recordkeeping through Clear Computing, which they still use today for billing, inventory, routing and reporting.

Beginning in 1998, they also bought new trucks and started replacing the entire fleet. In 2004, Rice’s father, George, sold him his share of the business.

The fleet today includes 16 vacuum trucks (mostly Peterbilt, International, Kenworth, Ford and Isuzu) built out by Keith Huber, Inc., Coleman, FMI Truck Sales & Service and Satellite Industries. Those built by Coleman, FMI and Satellite have tanks from Progress VacTruck. The majority of the tanks are aluminum, with four stainless steel and two steel. Sizes range from the biggest, outfitted with a 3,500-gallon stainless steel tank, to one with a 100-gallon wastewater/25-gallon freshwater tank. All pumps are from Armstrong Equipment, Inc.

Three pickup trucks hold two or three portable restrooms. The company has six trailers, three from Carson Trailer and three from McKee

Technologies, which carry 10 to 14 units apiece. Three flatbed trailers are used to haul fencing and carry 100 psi air compressors.

When the company started adding hand-sanitizer units to all of its restrooms, customers took notice. Construction customers appreciated the addition, word got out, and that helped to generate new customers. A-Throne’s business is now 60 percent construction, 25 percent special events and 15 percent fence rental.

PARTING ADVICE

Reflecting on his long career in portable sanitation, what does Rice recommend for others in the industry? Know your cost of service like the back of your hand. Make sure you make a profit on your work, and that it’s enough to cover unforeseen hiccups, such as breakdowns and accidents. Institute a price increase, if needed.

“In this economy it’s tougher than ever,” Rice adds. “But we’re still not going to do it if it isn’t profitable.” ■

MORE INFO

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Keith Huber, Inc.
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FMI Truck Sales & Service
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Bob Carlson is author of Pumper 101: The Complete Guide to Owning and Operating a Vacuum Truck and has spent many years building and repairing trucks for the portable sanitation industry. Send questions for Carlson to truckcorner@promonthly.com.



Check Valve Location is Key

Where you place the vacuum and pressure relief valves is important to promote frequent vital safety monitoring

By Bob Carlson

QUESTION: The used truck I bought wasn't the jewel I thought it would be. I am having trouble locating my pressure relief and vacuum relief valve. I know you've touched on the subject in the past, but could you explain how they work and the best place to locate them on the truck?

John Reddington
Miami, Fla.

ANSWER: The pressure relief valve and the vacuum relief valve do exactly what their names imply. If your pump is in the pressure mode from the four-way valve, the pressure relief valve can be set to open when the air in the tank

reaches a predetermined level of pressure. With the valve open, the air in the tank rushes out through the valve and drops the pressure inside the tank.

A tank that builds up pressure beyond its normal capacity can explode. I saw the results of one of those explosions many years ago. In this case, it was a pressure tank designed for water use at a retirement community in Sun City, Arizona. When the tank exploded, the two heads (ends) of the tank blew out and land about 200 yards away. It was fortunate that no one was hurt and damage was minimal. The pressure tank system was located on a golf course.

The message is clear: Be careful with pressure building in your vacuum tank. The pressure relief valve should take the worry away.

The vacuum relief valve does exactly the opposite job. As vacuum builds in the tank, the preset vacuum relief valve will open and allow incoming air to be released, ensuring the tank will operate safely in the future. If the vacuum relief valve is stuck or broken, it is possible heightened vacuum inside the tank will cause it to collapse, or implode.

The vacuum relief and the pressure relief valves are inexpensive components to help you operate safely. But you can't ignore them and hope they continue to work properly. You need to identify them (see the detailed photo) and check them. For pressure relief, you simply pull the round ring and for vacuum relief, you push the spring in.

Sometimes grit and other debris settle on the valves and make them inoperable. Both valves need to be tested at least once a week to make sure they are in good working order. To simplify the regular testing, have the valves on any new truck located where they are easy to see and access. I am a big fan of locating them as close to the pump as possible. To make the job even easier, place the vacuum/pressure gauge in between the two, as shown in the photo.

To simplify the regular testing, have the valves on any new truck located where they are easy to see and access. I am a big fan of locating them as close to the pump as possible. To make the job even easier, place the vacuum/pressure gauge in between the two.

In the past, I have seen the valves located in many different spots on vacuum trucks. It's almost as if they were put in last and no one was quite

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sure what they were or where they belonged. The arrangement in the photo shows you the best way to bring your safety valves into play.



This is Bob Carlson's preferred layout for the vacuum and pressure relief valves, near to the pump and in an easily accessible location that will remind drivers of necessary checks. (Photos courtesy of Bob Carlson)

And a final note concerning the pressure/vacuum gauge: I have always likened this valuable tool to a medical thermometer. For humans 98.6 degrees F is a normal temperature. To stray away from that tends to indicate trouble. It's the same with the pressure/vacuum gauge. If your gauge suddenly sees an increase or decrease in normal operation, you have a sick system. Stop, diagnose the situation, and get it fixed.

Ultimately, your pressure/vacuum gauge is the key to determining the health of your vacuum system. The pressure relief and the vacuum relief valves might be the key to saving your system. Pay attention to these items.



This is what can happen if you don't properly check and maintain your vacuum relief valve. This tank imploded under unregulated vacuum.

TRUCK CORNER QUIZ WINNER

Thanks to everyone who answered the questions on the Truck Corner quiz in the January issue. The first winning entry was submitted by Richard Davis, of Davis Plumbing and Mechanical Inc. in Aztec, N.M. Davis received a Truck Corner prize package for answering all quiz questions correctly. ■

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PRODUCT NEWS

Titan in-bed diesel fuel tank



The 60-gallon, polyethylene, in-bed diesel fuel tank from Titan Fuel Tanks fits most full-size pickups. Made to resist the corrosive properties of diesel, biodiesel fuels and additives, the 51-pound customizable tank is fully baffled to prevent load shifting. It can be secured using eye-nuts or the optional utility riser bracket that allows for up to 4 inches of clearance for under-tank storage. 800/728-4982; www.titanfuel tanks.com. ■

INDUSTRY NEWS

Holden Industries acquires Vector Technologies

Holden Industries, parent company of Vac-Con, acquired Vector Technologies. Based in Milwaukee, Wis., Vector designs and manufactures industrial vacuum cleaning systems for hazardous and non-hazardous material handling. Holden Industries is an employee-owned company based in Deerfield, Ill., with manufacturing facilities in Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, Texas, Georgia, Michigan, California and Arizona, as well as India and Taiwan.

JAG names Vanette marketing solutions coordinator

JAG Mobile Solutions named Nickie Vanette marketing and solutions coordinator for the mobile restroom, shower and specialty trailer manufacturer.



Five Peaks names business development director

Five Peaks named Dave Bamberg executive director of business development. He helps build the Five Peaks brand and launch its product line. ■

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BUSINESSES

Turn key portable restroom business for sale in Southern New Hampshire. Over 25 years in business with great customer base & service reputation. 138 PJ3's, 4 PJ3's with sinks, 9 handicaps, 10 Fleets with solar lights, 3 stand alone double sinks. 16 all white fresh water flushes with solar lights, two 275-gallon poly holding tanks, parts & supplies. One 2006, F550 with 350 sewer/120 chemical water and 120 wash down tank. Carries 4 restrooms on truck bed and 2 on drop down gate. One 6 place solid floor explorer trailer and a handy hauler single unit carrier. Owner finance with money down. Call 603-428-3351. (T04)

Business for sale: \$1,200,000. Vacuum truck and portable toilet business in northern Ontario, Canada. Established, turn key operation, large customer base, three vacuum trucks, two toilet trucks, 100 plus toilets, wash stations, trailers and five dump sites. Owner retiring, but can help with transition. Property optional. 705-356-3444. (P04)

SUNNY SOUTH FLORIDA business for sale: Full service septic tank contractor; retiring. Established over 20 years. POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH. Call Chris 305-297-2171. (PI07)

FOR SALE: Premier Portable Restroom business in southwestern Colorado/Four Corners region, 25+ years with solid customer base and service reputation. 2012 revenue \$472,000; last four year average \$465,000. Equipment includes: 24' comfort station, 2 NuConcepts, 15 Premier units, 800 units in excellent condition, 13 handicaps, 16 pots on wheels, 13 sinks, 6 service trucks, (2) 34' heavy duty trailers and more. Turn Key \$550,000 cash. Inquire to DHRMS@frontier.net or Bob's Johns, 406 Snowcap Lane, Durango, CO 81303. (P04)

COMPUTER SOFTWARE

FreeServiceReminderSoftware.com, FreeServiceDispatchSoftware.com, FreeRouteManagementSoftware.com. (CPT04)

PORTABLE RESTROOMS

Used portable restrooms: Construction grade, various colors/makes, \$125/unit. Quantity discount & shipping available. Call Chris at 218-343-0108 or email mrbiffy@centurytel.net. (PT05)

2005 PolyJohn/PolyLift: 24/each, PolyJohn PolyLift hi-rise restrooms. \$200/each or \$3,800/lot. Located southeast PA. 610-587-6159, bwyongjr@hotmail.com. (P05)

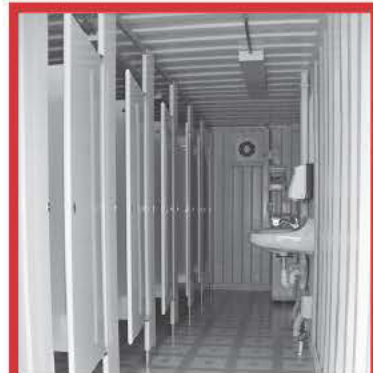
PORTABLE RESTROOMS

500 white Olympic fiberglass toilets, construction grade, \$50/each, handicaps, \$250. Located in Albuquerque, NM. Call 505-345-3965 or email aaapumping@hotmail.com. (P06)

100 PolyJohn PJ3 construction grade portable restrooms, mostly blue with white roof, some blue and yellow, \$175 each. 845-883-5563. (P05)

70 gray Poly-Mini's (shortened units that fit into construction elevators). 2 years old. Located in St. Louis area. 618-538-5885, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. CST. (P05)

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Container Restrooms: Our company had a project at a local industry that needed to remodel their restrooms. We converted 20' containers into restrooms. The project is done, we now have them for sale. 3 units have 7 stalls and 2 sinks, 1 unit has 4 stalls, 4 urinals and 2 sinks. ASIL have A/C, mirrors, vinyl floor, lights and dispensers. Great for long term projects. No holding tanks or axles, transport on a flat bed. Delivery available. Send email or call for more pictures.\$6,500/each
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PORTABLE RESTROOM TRUCKS



1994 Volvo: 1,500-gallon portable toilet truck, low miles, only used for one special event a year, strong vacuum pump, runs great. Have more trucks for sale as well. Northern California.\$12,500
Call Tavis 707-496-2986 P04

1989 Ford 7.3 International automatic, 500W/250F; \$7,500/OBO. 1993 Isuzu, 6-spd, new clutch and rebuilt transmission in 2009, 400W/400F; 9,000/OBO. Both trucks are well maintained. 715-654-5836, WI. (P04)

2004 Ford F450, diesel, 600 waste, 130 water, Condé HD 6 pump. **www.pumpertruck-sales.com**. Call JR. @ 720-253-8014, CO. (PBM)

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