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April 2024
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It's HER Destiny

Mitzi Autry grew up in the wastewater industry and returned to portable sanitation and septic service when she decided to start a new business to support her family

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Profile:

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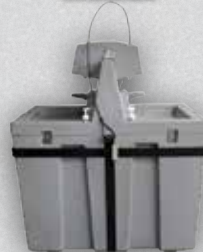
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COVER PHOTO: Mitzi Autry watched her father run a septic and portable sanitation business while growing up in the wastewater industry. Many years later she returned with her own company, Mitzi Autry's Portable Toilets in Owensboro, Kentucky. Autry is shown in the company yard with restrooms from PolyJohn. (Photo by Martin Cherry)



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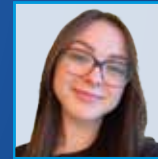


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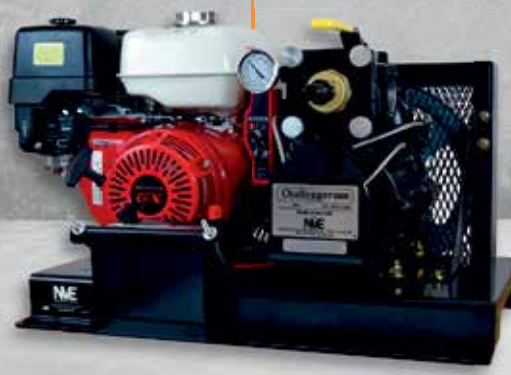
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By Jim Kneiszel

How to Prompt an Avalanche of Positive Reviews

Florida's Porta Serve uses Facebook to seek feedback from special event users and ensure they're maintaining quality service

CONTACT US:

PRO strives to serve the portable restroom industry with interesting and helpful stories. We welcome your comments, questions and column suggestions and promise a prompt reply to all reader contacts. Email PRO editor Jim Kneiszel at editor@promonthly.com or call 800-257-7222.

Two years ago this month, we featured Florida restroom provider Porta Serve Portable Sanitation and its outstanding service to the Suwannee Hulaween festival. This is the company's biggest event gig held every October and drawing up to 30,000 attendees to take in diverse live music, spectacular light shows and a weekend of camping.

In that feature, we learned how the Porta Serve deploys more than 500 restrooms and lots of associated equipment, eight service trucks and 30-plus employees — full time and temporary — to the 800-acre Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park in Live Oak, Florida, about 50 miles from company headquarters. The crew is constantly moving to make rounds at 62 service points in the park, collecting about 160,000 gallons of waste. The crew stays on-site throughout working around all those revelers.

This type of event would be the highlight of the summer season for most PROs. You'd like to land a job like this and provide the best service possible to keep the contract.

THE REST OF THE STORY

We covered all the facts and figures of the event during an interview with Porta Serve owner Ross Ambrose. But with the event season right around the corner for most PROs, and after a recent email follow-up conversation with Ambrose, I thought that, as Paul Harvey used to say on his radio program, it's time to tell "the rest of the story."

And that is a tale of how to prompt an avalanche of positive responses from attendees; not about the music or the light shows, but about the portable restrooms at their favorite event. Believe it or not. Here is just a sampling of the social media buzz Porta Serve enjoyed during and post-Hulaween:

"Y'all did a badass job that nobody else would want to do. So for that, thank you very, very much."

"Cleanest porta johns I've seen at any fest! Great job guys. Thank you."

"Thanks for what you guys do! Honestly the cleanest Hula potties have ever been. I used to dread having to go into them. I would stand in the never-ending line for the very few flushing toilets. But never had an issue this weekend. Even with as hot as it got during the day."

"I've rented from y'all for at least the last five Hula's. You guys always work so hard and are always in good spirits. This year was the absolute best! Our camp was a little larger than expected and you guys were like clockwork."

"Cleanest port-a-potties and always stocked on TP. Honestly the best bathroom situation out of the 10 fests I've been to yet."

"Never used too dirty of a bathroom all week. 100% kept up to better standards than any other fest I've been to."

"Hands down the best toilet crew in all of America. You're doing God's work."

"You guys literally make events like this possible. Thank you so much for your service."

EDUCATING THE CROWD

And the thread of comments went on and on after Ambrose posted a "thank you" message on the Hulaween Facebook page. Besides the positive reviews, social media posts allowed attendees to call out specific members of the Porta Serve team that helped them. They also made a number of requests for future service, including adding more units with open grid floors, adding more KROS International standing urinals and praising units with solar lighting and convenience shelving. And users were actually educating others on topics such as bagging so-called flushable wipes and throwing them in the trash rather than dropping them in the restroom holding tank.

Five-star Google reviews or website testimonials are potent sales tools. So at a time when small businesses have to practically beg customers to leave positive reviews, how did Porta Serve generate more endorsements from Hulaween than a busy editor could actually get through while trying to write a column?

The key to success is working for it, both on the front end by providing the type of service folks would rave about, and on the back end by maintaining a consistent social media presence and asking users for feedback. Ambrose enjoys engaging with festival-goers and they seem to appreciate it.

"When you throw this out to a fan base with 43,000 followers on the page [Hulaween's social media] and these are the responses, it is telling," Ambrose wrote to me. "We think the effort impacted how people took care of the units and made it easier for us as a team to do our best. Things were certainly not perfect, but by the reviews, we did a pretty good job and I'm not sure these responses would be typical of other large events."

"We openly own, on social media, mistakes when they happen ... responding when people have had issues makes them feel heard and they don't have to be the victim of a faceless company contracted to handle sanitation."

Ross Ambrose

GAINING TRUST

Ambrose explained that multi-day festivals can be challenging for PROs at the outset. Attendees can be careless and disrespectful of the portable restrooms and create more time-consuming and difficult scheduled services. You have probably witnessed this yourselves: When users are rough on equipment and create messes to clean up or vandalize units that require on-site repairs or swapping out, it takes longer to make the rounds and restrooms can become overused. It's a downward service spiral that can kill a PRO's reputation.

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“We all know that the public often has a poor perception of portable sanitation, especially for multi-day events, in this case a camping festival,” Ambrose said. “Over the years we have engaged online and been very aware of how the team interacts with the crowd. We see more and more care being taken by guests when they see there is a serious effort to maintain the facilities.”

Back to the front end, Ambrose said the Porta Serve crew:

- Keeps a regular service schedule in the campground areas.
- Has a marked cart that routinely checks on the condition of restrooms and will call for additional service as needed.
- Returns frequently to units determined to have excessive usage to replenish paper products and pick up trash.
- Engages on social media when immediate feedback will improve service.

Ambrose is the funnel through which all social media posts from the company flow. He feels it’s important to have one person acting as a clearinghouse for comments, to sort of moderate responses and personalize the experience.

“When there is a name behind the issues of sanitation, there is more accountability,” he said. “We openly own, on social media, mistakes when they happen. We don’t always get it right, but we do try and make notes to improve. Just responding when people have had issues makes them feel heard and they don’t have to be the victim of a faceless company contracted to handle sanitation.”

NOW TRY THIS

What can PROs start doing this season to build a strong reputation for event service? Ambrose shared a few suggestions based on Porta Serve’s success with Hulaween:

Share social media efforts with your event client. Back and forth with your users and positive comments like those above can show event planners the true value of providing quality portable sanitation. “A promoter will spend money to improve the atmosphere in any number of ways. If you can get promoters to also understand that



Ross Ambrose communicates with a crew member during Hulaween.



The Porta Serve crew cleans restrooms at Hulaween. Restrooms were provided by Satellite Industries and PolyJohn.



Porta Serve’s Ross Ambrose, left, meets with the crew on the ground at Suwannee Hulaween.



Porta Serve creates a new custom crew T-shirt every year for the Hulaween festival.

“Over the years we have engaged online and been very aware of how the team interacts with the crowd. We see more and more care being taken by guests when they see there is a serious effort to maintain the facilities.”

Ross Ambrose

the cost of sanitation is not simply overhead, but also a marketing cost, they are less likely to go for the least expensive option,” Ambrose said.

Take a green approach to the use of standard restrooms. Going green is a trend many festival-goers can get behind. Ambrose has a way to use that message to turn a negative into a positive. “People talk about wanting to be green and recycle at festivals. Yet they often complain at the lack of flushing, plumbed toilets. We try to create some acceptance of traditional drop tank toilets by connecting the saving of water and how these systems reduce environmental impact,” he said.

Build personal relationships between your crew and the crowds. Every year, Porta Serve designs a creative new T-shirt the workers wear while they’re on the grounds. It’s something that generates a lot of interaction with attendees and they hear a lot of compliments. This builds rapport and makes attendees and campers want to reflect the goodwill and take care of the portable sanitation equipment. “The shirts and the tone of the posts work to help humanize the team, while demonstrating that we can have some fun during their vacation, too,” Ambrose said.

RISK AND REWARD

We have all heard harsh commentary about portable sanitation from users on social media. The reality is that one bad experience with a portable restroom can lead folks to jump on Facebook or Instagram and brand all restrooms as disgusting. Frankly, I have found this to be quite unfair to PROs, but that’s just the cards you’ve been dealt when your work is cleaning up human waste.

But Porta Serve’s experience suggests you should be seeking social media feedback rather than running from any negativity that comes along with it. And the results could be particularly fruitful when it comes to your biggest summer event clients, those you want to work especially hard to satisfy and keep on your calendar. It’s hard to argue about the way it’s worked for Ambrose and Hulaween.

“This type of relationship is hard, but when you do large events year after year, it is important to immerse yourself in the vibe,” Ambrose said. “Being a part of the event’s social media really helps you know more about the crowd. I know it works because people who I do not know will come up to me and say, ‘You’re Ross, right? Doing a great job’ and then wander off to get back to the music.” ■

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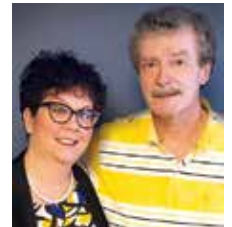
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Jeff and Terri Wigley are portable sanitation industry veterans, having owned and operated Atlanta-based Pit Stop Sanitation Services for 25 years. Send your questions or comments to editor@promonthly.com.

Where to Go for Reliable Industry Information

Sometimes unfiltered social media rants are not the best place to look for advice on important small-business issues. Try these sources for help.



Jeff and Terri Wigley

By Jeff and Terri Wigley

In our fast-paced world, we are constantly bombarded with new ideas, innovations and questions. Where do we turn for information about our business, our employees and our customers? This month we delve into a search for sources of information about our industry.

QUESTION: We are a three-year-old company, and we frequently encounter questions across a wide range of topics. Our usual approach is to post these inquiries on social media in hopes of receiving timely responses. What are your thoughts on this method of obtaining answers in our industry?

ANSWER: None of us have all of the answers. We admire your willingness to rely on others to assist with your questions. We can learn a great deal from others — from their successes and from their mistakes. However, we suggest expanding your knowledge base beyond social media posts to obtain “quick answers” by taking advantage of other resources containing valuable industry information.

Here are some sources we have found to be valuable for portable sanitation contractors.

PRO and Pumper magazine libraries and social media

These magazines are excellent resources for accessing years of industry knowledge. Did you know that you have online access to every issue of *PRO* magazine since 2007 and every issue of *Pumper* magazine since 2008?

The search option on their websites (www.promonthly.com and www.pumper.com) allows you to find articles on various topics including basic operations, best practices, customer service, new products and current issues, just to name a few. Your questions can be answered professionally and accurately with years of shared experience from PROs and research from the reporting staff. You can also see advancements and changes in the approach to various challenges over the years.

Company profile articles can offer insights, valuable information and inspiration. You can learn from these companies’ experiences, and you might even consider contacting them directly if you have additional questions based on their shared information.

You can find this information and more on other social media applications. On Facebook, “PRO Magazine - Serving Portable Restroom Operators” has a large following. Instagram (@promonthly) and X (formerly Twitter) are

quite popular (@ProMonthly). Again, you can find more detailed information and answers to questions concerning our industry.

Industry supplier resources

Suppliers interact with multitudes of PROs and, over the course of time, have developed materials to answer common questions and to assist companies where needed. Here are several examples of the vast amount of information available to assist in your quest for knowledge and answers.

PolyJohn offers *JohnTalk*, a newsletter with current and topical information on our industry (www.johntalk.com). This publication began in 2017 and now has a large collection of 432 entries containing industry-specific facts and figures. As with *PRO* and *Pumper*, the “search” feature is valuable in your investigation of particular topics. There are also manuals available for use by PROs that cover topics such as marketing your business, finding and keeping good employees, best practices, and even a guide to starting your own portable restroom business. Templates are available for sample rental contracts, applications for employment, inventory forms and truck maintenance and safety inspection reports that are useful information for PROs to investigate.

Suppliers interact with multitudes of PROs and, over the course of time, have developed materials to answer common questions and to assist companies where needed.

Satellite Industries (www.satelliteindustries.com) also offers helpful and useful information for PROs. Satellite’s website offers planning tools such as route scheduling, special event pricing, product maintenance and a restroom calculator for determining the correct number of units at an event. Its blog, *The Weekly Download*, has a large collection of useful information and tips that are helpful in answering questions PROs may have.

ServiceCore (www.servicecore.com) features information on its website from a blog to case studies to its new ToiletTalk series of 32 video podcasts. Recently, ServiceCore compiled its *2022 Portable Sanitation Industry Benchmark Report* from collected data from operator interviews and surveys. This report allows operators to evaluate their operation in comparison to other companies, to investigate areas to increase revenue and to look at important topics such as industry growth and supply chain challenges. A new *Bench-*



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mark Report is in the planning stages. ServiceCore has also developed four eBooks for PROs to use – *Driver Playbook*, *Routing Playbook*, *Billing Playbook* and *Starting a Business Playbook*.

These are just some examples of sources of useful information that offer more in-depth and descriptive information when a simple post on social media cannot adequately cover or explain. Check with your suppliers and you will find that in addition to their product lines and descriptions, they also provide useful general information for PROs.

Portable Sanitation Association International

The association (www.psa.org) was founded in 1971 and the website features a large collection of information. PSAI is the face of our industry to the public, local regulators and the federal government in the U.S. The PSAI also interacts with other organizations worldwide.

Education, training and certification are major areas of focus, and the website has a collection of material — both written and video — to assist PROs in training and retaining employees. The complete PSAI Training and Certification Programs are soon to be available online and on-demand, increasing the number of route service technicians that can be certified.

The Industry Library has a collection of articles and information ranging from best practices to templates on the cost of doing business to the new ANSI Standards that the PSAI has provided input and support. The Glossary contains 197 entries and is a valuable training tool and an excellent resource to find a quick definition of unfamiliar industry terminology. The biweekly newsletter is sent electronically to all members covering current issues, training opportunities and industry education as the primary focus. The PSAI also prepares the annual Industry Resource Directory that contains ANSI, OSHA and ADA standards that guide our industry, best practices, and a member directory of both operators and suppliers.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

Learning about our industry is an ongoing and neverending process. Sometimes we need quick answers, and we create a post on a social media page and often get rapid responses. Most answer the question based on best practices, but some do not, while others are just plain incorrect. Frequently, answers also involve the discussion of prices and pricing, which is in direct violation of U.S. antitrust laws.

The purpose of our column this month was to introduce PROs to more reliable and in-depth sources to obtain answers to questions. These sources are professional, reputable, and based on sound knowledge and years of experience. Our best advice is to keep asking those questions and your company, your employees, and your customers will benefit from the answers. ■



The SOS Toilets team includes, from left, Marisa Horn, office manager; Monika Hederova, co-owner; Sheridan Collins, office administrator, with Mellow the office dog; and Yaniv Gohar, co-owner.

Ready, Set, Grow!

After a rapid ramp-up, SOS Toilets was forced to refocus on sputtering customer service

STORY: Peter Kenter | PHOTOS: David Elkins



SOS Toilets Richmond, California

FOUNDED: 2021
OWNERS: Monika Hederova, Yaniv Gohar
EMPLOYEES: 12
SERVICES: Portable sanitation, temporary fence rentals
SERVICE AREA: 65-mile radius around Richmond, including the San Francisco Bay area
AFFILIATIONS: Portable Sanitation Association International
WEBSITE: sostoilet.com

Most every portable restroom operator welcomes growth, and SOS Toilets of Richmond, California is no exception. But somewhere along the two-year road from zero to 1,200 portable restrooms, this contractor stepped back to focus on its top priority — customer satisfaction.

Yaniv Gohar moved to the U.S. 18 years ago from Israel. With a keen interest in the construction market, he started a roll-off container company in New York, sold the business and moved to California, where he renovated and sold residential homes. In 2017, he returned to Israel to start a portable restroom business, building an inventory of 250 Armal units in less than a year.

But feeling a strong pull for his adopted country, he sold the business and returned to California in 2019, where he married Monika Hederova. The couple launched SOS Toilets in 2021.

“I love the construction industry, and I already had many contacts in the California industry,” Gohar says. “I also love to meet different clients, service a variety of events and respond to emergencies. In this business, no two days are alike.”

Gohar credits his wife as the backbone of the business. A co-owner of SOS, Hederova gets up daily at 4:30

a.m., operates dispatch and manages driver schedules. Gohar handles sales and advertising, manages the yard, orders supplies and ensures equipment is properly cleaned and maintained.

OFF TO A QUICK START

The business serves the San Francisco Bay area, in a 65-mile radius around Richmond. SOS began with considerable goodwill from construction customers with whom Gohar was already familiar, but equipment shortages and production slowdowns caused by COVID-19 soon emerged.

SOS started with 200 Armal restrooms and three luxury trailers from Black Tie Products, two five-station and one three-station. The vacuum truck fleet included a pair of Fords with slide-in aluminum tanks and Masport pumps: a 2020 F-550 built by PortaLogix featuring 500-gallon waste/300-gallon freshwater tank, and a 2016 F-350 built by Robinson Vacuum Tanks offering 300-gallon waste/150-gallon freshwater tank.

“My first contract started October 2021, with the equipment arriving just in time,” Gohar recalls. “By January I ordered an additional 100 units from Armal, and the month after that another 100. I had one full-time employee

and together we were doing all of the delivery, pickup and servicing. We bought a 10-unit delivery trailer from McKee Technologies, which helped, but we were still working to 10 p.m. each night. We were so heavily booked, we didn't have time to put SOS stickers on the units before we delivered them."

Each month brought more work, and more equipment orders. In 2021, Gohar expanded the truck fleet with a new off-the-lot 2019 International with a 900-gallon waste/375-gallon freshwater aluminum tank and National Vacuum Equipment pump built out by FlowMark Vacuum Trucks.

But it wasn't enough to catch up on contracts. Work continued to outpace workers and schedules began to suffer.

LOST CONTROL

"In the first two months of 2022, I had to admit to myself that I had lost control of the business," Gohar says. "People were complaining about cleaning and missed appointments. I didn't have enough drivers, trucks were all over the place and Monika was getting complaints from customers."

Realizing that he had to steer the company back on course, Gohar approached every customer he felt he had let down.

"I apologized," he said. "I explained straight up what happened, no excuses. It was the cost of not preparing. The company grew too fast and I lost control of customer service. I promised to sort it out and put it back together."

Most clients understood and either stuck with SOS or offered to wait for a call to revisit the company's offerings in a few months. A few fell away for good. However, the company also continued to gain new clients.

"I realized I needed to invest in enough equipment to meet our service promises and also invest in enough good workers to keep up with the schedule of a growing business," he says. "And I needed to do it now."

Gohar immediately ordered a second 2019 International with a 900-gallon waste/375-gallon freshwater aluminum tank and NVE pump from FlowMark, and a 2021 Ford F-250 with a 200-gallon waste/100-gallon

freshwater aluminum slide-in tank and Masport pump from KeeVac Industries. He also ordered additional portable restrooms and ADA units to enhance inventory.

LABOR CHALLENGES

He notes that Northern California labor costs are high, but committed to paying above-market wages in order to attract dedicated workers.

"For a new business with limited revenue to pay that much is tough, especially if you're ordering more and more equipment," Gohar says. "But if you need good people, you need to pay them what that's worth."

SOS soon began to hire more motivated workers, even as equipment was delivered. While the company didn't recover overnight, Gohar likens it to the performance of a bull market — some good days and some down days, following an overall upward trend.



Above: Technician Rody Badua returns the suction hose after servicing a restroom at a home construction site. The truck is from FlowMark and carries a National Vacuum Equipment pump. **Below:** Badua pumps the holding tank of a NuConcepts trailer-mounted restroom unit stationed at an event in San Jose, California. The International service truck carries a National Vacuum Equipment pump and was built out by FlowMark.



"I had to admit to myself that I had lost control of the business. People were complaining about cleaning and missed appointments. I didn't have enough drivers, trucks were all over the place and Monika was getting complaints."

Yaniv Gohar

Yaniv Gohar uses a wire to secure the door of an Armal restroom closed to discourage vandalism inside when the unit is not in use.



Within six months, the company was back on its feet, meeting client commitments while ensuring that the company’s growth didn’t outpace its capacity to deliver service.

Today, SOS employs 12 people, including Hederova and Gohar: four in the office, four delivery drivers (three full-time and one part-time) and four vacuum truck operators, who work out of a 22,000-square-foot building.

BEEF UP THE INVENTORY

The company offers 850 portable restrooms from Armal and 350 from PolyJohn, including 20 ADA units. Walex Products supplies all chemicals. PolyJohn supplied the company’s 100 hand-wash stations. Seven holding tanks ranging from 250 to 300 gallons are a mix of Armal and PolyJohn.



Rudy Badua navigates his truck during a service route through downtown San Jose, California.

SOS has added a 12-unit delivery trailer from McKee Technologies and three Ford flatbeds, which deliver 10, eight and seven units each. One unbranded trailer carries a plastic tank containing 500 gallons of freshwater. A Ford F-650 is dedicated to delivering from a stockpile of 25,000 feet of temporary fence, supplied by ZND US — a recent offering designed to enhance service to construction customers.

THE NEW DRIVER TEST RIDE

When SOS Toilets invests in a new driver, the company wants to ensure that the new applicant stays hired.

“We pay well, but I let them know up front it’s a tough job to wake up at 4 a.m., be at the yard at quarter to 5 every single day and serve 30 to 40 customers on schedule,” says SOS co-owner, Yaniv Gohar. “We don’t want to make it sound easy.”

Describing the work is not the same as doing it, so SOS provides them with enough training to accompany another driver on a service route for a day or two.

“We then give them a couple of hours to do the work themselves and see how it goes,” Gohar says. “At the end of the third day, we ask them if they want to move ahead with full-time employment. Even if they choose to walk away, I respect their decision and we shake hands. It’s not a job for everyone, but it’s a great job for the right person.”

“If you undergo a rapid expansion, be sure you’re prepared for the ride. Grow at a pace you can handle, be straight up, keep your promises to everyone, and treat your customers right.”

Yaniv Gohar

The company now offers 13 luxury restroom trailers, including the original Black Tie trio: three from Satellite Industries — a one-station ADA trailer, a four-station and a three-station; six from NuConcepts — three two-station models and three single-station; and a two-station trailer with showers from Forest River Mobile Restroom Trailers.

SOS also offers two additional vacuum trucks on top of the original five, with both new trucks featuring aluminum tanks — a 2022 Ford F-550, with a 900-gallon waste/375-gallon freshwater tank and NVE pump from FlowMark, and a 2019 Ford F-350 with 300-gallon waste/150-gallon freshwater tank and Masport pump built by KeeVac Industries. The trucks are dispatched using Pro Trucking Dispatch software.

Gohar estimates about 80% of the company’s business is devoted to construction, with 20% in long-term industrial and agricultural rentals or parks contracts, and events, such as weddings. He counts emergency work for companies including Walmart, Amazon, Home Depot and Walgreens as bonus revenue.

“I have contracts with some companies where we provide restroom rental and service if there’s been a water main break or bathrooms are out of commission,” he says. “On a recent job, I provided 20 portable restroom units to a warehouse that employs 2,000 people and we were servicing them every three hours. On another contract we served 3,000 people with five trailers that had to be serviced four times a day.”

BE PREPARED

Gohar regularly attends the WWETT Show and PSAI trade show, primarily to meet vendors.

“I talk to vendors by phone all the time,” he says. “Sitting down and having dinner with a vendor, talking and sharing a laugh is a great way to build a relationship.”

Business is good and Gohar says his new website, which stresses transparent pricing and offers self-serve equipment and service ordering, has attracted many new clients.



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His advice to contractors starting out?

“Everybody wants to grow fast, but if you undergo a rapid expansion, be sure you’re prepared for the ride,” he says. “Grow at a pace you can handle, be straight up, keep your promises to everyone, and treat your customers right. Following my own advice, I’m very happy with where we are today.” ■

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SOS co-owner Yaniv Gohar, shown in the company yard. A Satellite Suites restroom trailer is seen in the background.

TAKE 5...

with Mitzi Autry's Portable Toilets

It's Her Destiny

Mitzi Autry grew up in the wastewater industry and returned to portable sanitation and septic service when she decided to start a new business to support her family

STORY: Betty Dageforde | PHOTOS: Martin Cherry

Mitzi Autry and her son, Jakob Shuler, are shown with a fleet of service trucks built out by Best Enterprises with slide-in tanks and Conde pumps.

When third-grader Mitzi Autry heard her father say he was buying a honey wagon, she couldn't wait to tell the kids at school — and then she learned what it really was. Thus began her education in the sanitation industry.

That was in 1985 when her father was getting started with a septic pumping business, later adding portable restrooms. She tagged along with him and worked with her mother in the office throughout her childhood.

So in 2011 she was well-prepared to start her own portable restroom business when she found herself going through a divorce and needing to support her family. By then her father had gotten out of portable sanitation, so she started from scratch.

"I went to a couple people in Kentucky and one of them sold me an old slide-in tank," she says. "Then I got with a guy in Florida who had a couple semi loads of portable toilets. I went down there and looked them over. I had never done something like that in my life — give someone a bunch of money and hope they ship something to you."

Mitzi Autry's Portable Toilets is located in Owensboro, Kentucky. In 2023 she expanded into septic and grease work, creating a separate business, Ohio Valley Septic & Grease Services.

Autry has several hundred portable restrooms (PolyJohn), mostly orange. "I like the way it pops and they're easy to see on a job site," she says. And she has five vacuum trucks — 2017-2022 Chevy 3500HDs with aluminum flatbeds built out by Best Enterprises with 400-gallon waste/200-gallon freshwater stainless steel slide-in tanks and Conde (Westmoor) pumps — and another one on order.

Although she now has a staff of five technicians and one office worker she's still very hands-on.

"I am a true owner-operator," she says. "I just rewired my truck. I do mechanical work, as much as I can. I'm just doing what I did growing up. But I'm still learning every day. I just find it interesting. I dig it."

EXPLORE FIVE ISSUES THAT AFFECT MITZI'S PORTABLE SANITATION BUSINESS:

1 SHARPENING MECHANICAL SKILLS

Autry admits being a woman in the industry does present some challenges. "The physical design of men and women is different," she says. "And I didn't take shop [classes] in high school. I didn't go out and fix cars with my dad."

But none of that stops her. She just figures out different ways of doing things. "It definitely makes me think about my equipment, how to handle it, how to get knowledge," she says. "You can't own a business like this with equipment and think someone else is going to do it for you. They're not."

For example — using slide-in tanks. "If I have a truck go down and can't figure out what's wrong with it, I can pick that tank up and put it on another truck," she says. "Basically it's a small engine, like a lawnmower. I can tear into a lawnmower. But when you're talking about a big truck engine, that's intimidating."

2 LAUNCHING RESTROOM TRAILER SERVICE

Autry always wanted to add restroom trailers to her inventory but wasn't sure her small farm community would go for it. She finally took the leap anyway and bought a used unit. But it turned out the timing was not the best.

"That was in February 2020," she says. "And in March the world shut down. I was so proud to get it and had made some videos and put it out there on social media. I was devastated."

But someone saw her video and she got her first job, which ended up paying for the trailer. "I took it to Lowe's," she says. "They kept it for a very long time to protect their employees. They were one of the few places open because they were considered essential. It was just luck, luck, luck."



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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Autry fulfilled a need for restroom trailers that continues to grow. Today she has three four-stall units from A Restroom Trailer Co.

After the pandemic she discovered there really was a need in her community for luxury trailers and now has three four-stall units from A Restroom Trailer Co.

3 ADDING SEPTIC AND GREASE SERVICES

“If you’re going to be in the waste business, septic and portable toilets go hand in hand,” Autry says. In 2023 she bought a 2024 Mack truck built out by Iron-Vac with a 2,000-gallon aluminum tank and Jurop pump.

So far, Autry is the only one who handles the truck. “It’s such an expensive piece of equipment, I’m not ready to let other people drive it,” she says. “So it’s been me and my husband trying to build that part of our business.” Autry remarried in 2022 and is now educating her husband, Darin Tapp, on the industry.

She gave the septic company a different name for maximum flexibility. “If I ever want to separate the businesses, it already has its own name, its own phone number.”

4 LIVING THE ALWAYS-ON-CALL LIFE

What Autry loves most about the business is making friends with her customers and serving her community. And she works hard at it.

“You can’t own a business like this with equipment and think someone else is going to do it for you. They’re not.”

Mitzi Autry

Autry fills a bucket of water to recharge restrooms on a service route.



Autry moves restrooms in the company yard.

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“I am a true owner-operator. I just rewired my truck. I do mechanic work, as much as I can. I’m just doing what I did growing up. But I’m still learning every day.”

Mitzi Autry



From left, Darin Tapp, Mitzi Autry and Jakob Shuler are shown with the fleet of trucks in the company yard.



Autry works in the office at the company that has expanded from portable sanitation service and into septic and grease trap work under the business name Ohio Valley Septic & Grease Services.

She personally answers the phone 24/7, only rarely turning it over to her assistant (such as when she’s in the noisy septic truck).

“I’m the best salesperson for me,” she says. “And in this world, it’s a lot about answering your phone. That has helped our business a lot.”

She is also available for emergencies, which typically involve one of the factories in town. “If they have a problem they have two options — either get portable toilets or let their crew go,” she says. “You can’t work people without restrooms.” She has contracts with a number of factories guaranteeing she’ll show up within two hours if they have a problem.

“Of course, they pay an upcharge,” she says. “But they’re going to remember that when they need units for a shutdown or maintenance.”



Office assistant Angie Bivens works on restroom service routes.

5 LEARNING TO MARKET THROUGH VIDEOS

Autry has posted videos on Facebook over the years, but she really stepped it up with the septic business because people were so uninformed.

“There are so many people who are city girls like me. We never had to think about, ‘What am I putting in my drain?’ But if you have septic, you better think about that. It’s a natural treatment plant and if you’re putting chemicals down there you’re disturbing it. I really want to get more in-depth with that.”

On a recent video, she discussed the danger of aging steel tanks still found in her area. “Steel rusts,” she says. “They’re notorious about caving in. A lot of people don’t even know they have them.”

Autry wants to eventually be on other forms of social media but Facebook is dominant in her area. “You’d be surprised how many people that gets out to and passed around,” she says. “Sometimes the silliest videos are the most viewed and shared.” ■

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By Craig Mandli

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PRODUCT NEWS



PRODUCT SPOTLIGHT

System levels the field for portable restrooms

By Tim Dobbins

Ideal placement for portable restrooms isn't a guaranteed luxury. Often, where they are needed most are areas where ground conditions are uneven and imperfect.

"We have seen it all," says Ross Pegg from **Datum Corporation**. "A portable restroom dropped on an unimproved or sloped site leaning over at a disturbing angle with the door hanging open, resulting in a negative perception that creates public pushback and also opens the door to vandalism and abuse."

Datum Corporation offers a solution with its **universal leveling system**. The product uses swiveling feet that bolt directly to restroom skids. "They attach to the groove on the underside of the skid with a single nut," Pegg says. "Then with a common screwdriver, the jacks are run down to the ground, leveling the unit." Additionally, they can be used to fine-tune the restrooms to have the door close properly.

No special tools are needed for attachment and users can employ as many leveling jacks as necessary, whether it requires one jack on a specific corner, or one on each of the four corners. "The swivel feet pads adapt to the ground condition," Pegg says. "The jacks have about 4 inches of travel and can be manipulated with a standard electric screwdriver."

The swivel feet are made of pressure-treated wood and can be fastened to other wooden blocks in instances of extreme slope, trenching or landscape holes. When not in use, the levels are fully retractable and slip under the skid into the underside cavity.

"The improved stability and uniform appearance of the restroom allows the unit to be placed in front of the site even if the ground is uneven, where it can be quickly and efficiently accessed for servicing," Pegg says, "rather than relegated to the rear of the site where access is a problem."

It was important for the team at Datum to make the leveling system affordable and capable of being installed by one person, and because of that, it was designed with minimal parts to decrease the potential for lost or broken pieces.

Pegg says users report positive feedback, saying the system allows them to place restrooms where they otherwise couldn't for a stable and secure unit. **704-968-6271; www.thedatumcorp.com** ■

CASE STUDY

PRO uses software to streamline business processes

PROBLEM: The owners of Ray's Sanitation in Wisconsin were spending too much time managing routes and billing. Routes needed daily updates, and billing required many hours to process during the busy season. That left little time for owner Megan Wilson to focus on other important tasks.

SOLUTION: Adam and Megan Wilson had a demo of Summit Rental System from Ritam Technologies and chose this software. It includes the desktop app for data entry, route planning and monitoring, billing and accounting functions, plus the iOS mobile app for technicians.

RESULT: Megan was creating routes within a few days. Billing was right behind that, and mobile apps came up instantly, showing each job, voice navigation, proof of service and progress monitoring from the office. Adam suggested route overviews so technicians know of pending deliveries and pickups before leaving, and Ritam quickly implemented it. **800-662-8471; www.ritam.com**





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What Are American National Standards and How Do They Help PROs?



By Veronica Crosier

The Portable Sanitation Association International plays several roles in the industry, but one of the most important may be maintaining the American National Standards for portable sanitation. PSAI proudly carries status as an accredited standards developer through the American National Standards Institute, or ANSI. These standards prescribe the minimum best practices for portable sanitation in work and public settings. Newly updated versions of these standards will be published in late spring and will help PROs hold their company and their clients to a higher caliber.

ANS are significant in ensuring the reliability, safety and compatibility of products and services for many industries. These standards, developed and

maintained by accredited organizations such as PSAI, serve as benchmarks guiding manufacturers, service providers and consumers alike. They contribute to the overall betterment of each industry by keeping up with the impacts of innovation, improving service quality, and facilitating clearer communication and collaboration between providers and end users.

The process of developing ANS is rigorous and requires extensive collaboration. Accredited standards developers must adhere to established procedures and meet specific criteria. These criteria include openness, balance, consensus and due process, ensuring all relevant stakeholders have a voice in the process.

Standards development starts with a proposal or identification of a need within an industry. Experts and stakeholders come together in committees to draft, review and refine the standards. Next comes the consensus-building process. This step is essential as it ensures diverse perspectives are heard, leading to standards that are widely accepted and adopted.

[PSAI's] standards serve as benchmarks that enhance operational excellence, safety and environmental responsibility.

ANS hold importance in their ability to create a level playing field for businesses and create an understanding between operators, manufacturers and customers. These standards account for innovation while ensuring the safety and reliability of products and services. While ANSI standards on their own aren't enforceable by law, it is common for municipalities or agencies to use the standards to inform their own enforceable standards.

PSAI's standards development is significant for operators, regardless of their association membership status. The standards serve as benchmarks that enhance operational excellence, safety and environmental responsibility. By adhering to these standards, operators demonstrate a commitment to industry best practices, earning trust and credibility among customers and stakeholders. Operating in accordance with these standards also fosters a culture of continuous industry improvement. Whether affiliated with the PSAI or not, operators may benefit significantly from the maintenance and continuous improvement of these standards, as they pave the way for elevated industry image, improved service quality and the overall advancement of the industry.

To learn more about PSAI's work and how to become involved, contact PSAI at info@psai.org. To learn more about the American National Standards Institute, visit www.ansi.org. ■

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 - Southeast portable sanitation and roll off company, \$5.25mm revenue *SOLD*
 - Northeast septic pumping and installation, \$5.2mm revenue
 - Southeast portable sanitation and roll off company, \$4.25mm revenue
 - Southeast portable sanitation and roll off company, \$4.0mm revenue
 - Northwest septic pumping and installation, \$3.6mm revenue
 - Midwest portable sanitation and restroom trailers, \$1.75mm revenue
 - Southwest portable sanitation company, \$1.75mm revenue
 - Southeast portable sanitation company, \$1.6mm revenue
 - Northeast portable sanitation company, \$1.0mm revenue
 - Mid-Atlantic septic company, \$1.0mm revenue
 - West coast portables and septic company, \$1.0mm revenue
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