

SEPTIC SYSTEM MAINTENANCE AND REJUVENATION

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**RAPID
RESPONSE**

Customer care is key
for Olson's Sewer Service

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RAPID RESPONSE

By Ken Wysocky

An emphasis on employee training, on-call troubleshooters and a live person answering the telephone build a great customer service reputation for Olson's Sewer Service Inc.

To generate word-of-mouth referrals and build customer loyalty, it pays to save money for clients. Olson's Sewer Service Inc. does just that by strategically installing septic systems with maintenance in mind and ensuring that well-trained employees have the know-how to spot potential problems before they develop into expensive repairs.

Based in Forest Lake, Minn., located northeast of Minneapolis/St. Paul, the 55-year-old company is in its second generation of family ownership, led by sibling owners LeeAnn Weigt and Jon Olson. They carry on a tradition of innovative marketing, as well as an emphasis on employee professionalism, all established by their parents, Bill and Verna Olson, who founded the company in 1954.

The siblings have diversified and grown the business since they took over the reins (Jon Olson assumed leadership in 1990 and Weigt joined the company in 1994). They added services such as septic system installations, excavating and waterjetting.

Left, Jon Olson prepares to pump a septic system. At right, Dave Tucci performs a squirt height test. Inspection ports at the end of laterals make it easier for technicians to troubleshoot and make repairs.

Dave Tucci and Jon Olson make electrical repairs in a weather-resistant junction box. Olson's Sewer Service tries to keep costs down for customers by installing septic systems with future maintenance in mind. (Photography by Michelle Dubois)



Profile

Olson's Sewer Service Inc. Forest Lake, Minn.

Owners: LeeAnn Weigt and Jon Olson

Founded: 1954

Employees: 20

Services: Septic tank pumping and system installation, excavating, waterjetting residential and municipal pipelines

Service area: Five-county area east of Minneapolis/St. Paul

Web site:

www.olsonsinthepink.com



Jon Olson and his sister LeeAnn Weigt are owners of the company founded by their parents, Bill and Verna Olson, in 1954.

"IT'S HARD TO PUT A PRICE ON BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS. THE TIME WE SPEND EDUCATING CUSTOMERS PAYS OFF, AND IN THIS ECONOMY, IT'S EVEN MORE TOP-OF-MIND. IF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO SPEND MONEY, THEY WANT THE MOST FOR THEIR DOLLAR AND TO PROTECT THEIR INVESTMENT IN THEIR SYSTEM."

LeeAnn Weigt

"Pumping tanks and installing drainfields are good complements to each other," Olson says. "If you pump a tank and find a problem, then you can fix it, too."

Adds Weigt: "Our ability to respond to emergencies and repair more complex systems also helps us stay busy in a challenging economy."

The diversification efforts have borne financial fruit. Since 1990, gross sales increased by slightly more than 400 percent, the number of employees tripled and the company's equipment fleet greatly expanded.

Olson's now owns a 2009 Kenworth T800 with a 4,500-gallon aluminum tank, built by Advance Pump & Equipment Inc.; a 2001 Peterbilt 330 with a 2,500-gallon steel tank, built by Jay's Inc.; a 1998 Peterbilt 357 with a 4,000-gallon steel tank, built by Advance Pump & Equipment; and a 1996 Mack RB690S with a 3,800-gallon steel tank, built by Engle Fabrication Inc.

The company also owns three service vehicles: a 1994 GMC Topkick, which carries confined-space entry apparatus, line televising and location equipment and repair parts;

a 2004 Chevrolet Kodiak, equipped with a 300-gallon water tank, high-pressure jetting equipment, line location and televising equipment and confined space entry apparatus; and a 2007 Chevrolet van. Four dump trucks and about a dozen pieces of excavating equipment round out the fleet.

SERVICE-FRIENDLY SYSTEMS

When installing septic systems, Olson's keeps future service needs in mind. For example, installers set up systems so that when the time comes, one person can install a new pump without any need for confined-space entry, Olson says.

Adds Weigt: "We look at the long-term picture. Mechanical devices will fail eventually, so we try to make it easy to make repairs, which keeps costs down for homeowners."

The company also installs inspection ports at the end of laterals, which allows technicians to more efficiently perform squirt tests. "The inspection ports make it much easier for maintenance and troubleshooting," Weigt says. "The guys just pull off the covers and do the test. If one squirt is higher than

the other one, then that could indicate a problem that needs to be investigated further.

"Or if a customer tells about certain symptoms, we have the ability to televise lines and spot problems," she adds. "Our employees have a full understanding of septic systems and how they work."

When it comes to strategic installations, the company also strives to:

- Locate new tanks where they're easily accessible for maintenance.
- Install covers flush with the grade, which eliminates the need for digging.
- Set pumps and switches in the lift station so technicians can access it from grade, without confined-space entry.
- Perform all electrical wiring with conduit; that way, there's no need for excavating if technicians have to pull new wires, and it protects wires from wildlife like moles and gophers.
- Use watertight, weather-resistant electric junction boxes made specifically for onsite sewer systems; they make service much easier.

Educating customers about septic systems is another key component of Olson's customer service program. There's a lot of misinformation and confusion surrounding septic tanks and systems, and it's not exactly a topic that comes up at barbecues and cocktail parties, Weigt says.

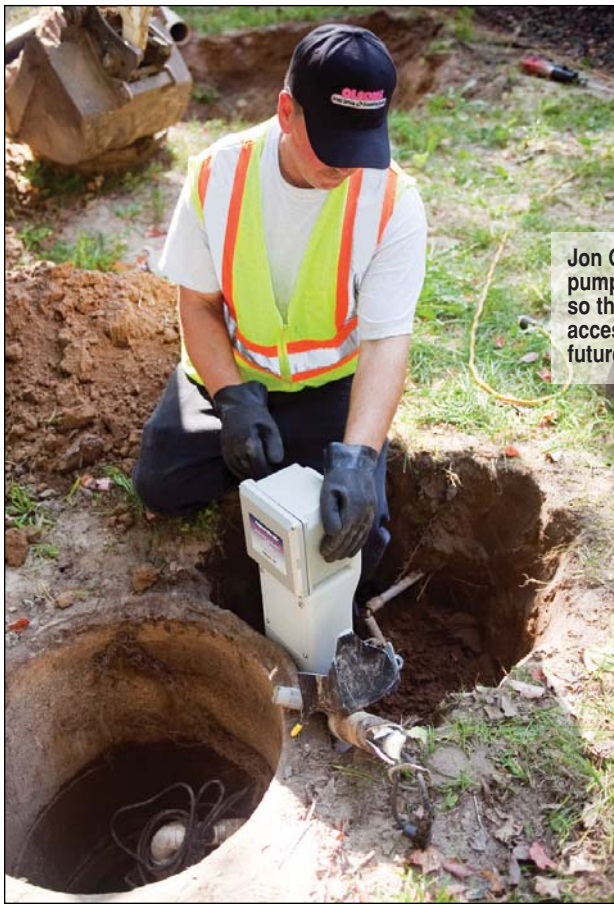


Liz Durant, Dale and LeeAnn Weigt take care of important details in the office.

“MOST PEOPLE IN THIS INDUSTRY RUN SMALL BUSINESSES AND ARE LOOKING FOR RESOURCES. THEY’RE CONCENTRATING ON THE DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS ... IT’S EASY TO GET MYOPIC. THESE ASSOCIATIONS CAN HELP.”

LeeAnn Weigt

Jon Olson locates pumps and switches so they can be accessed easily for future maintenance.



That’s why all Olson’s employees — from office staff to field workers — take a general course about septic systems, offered by the University of Minnesota. It includes subjects such as basic construction and installation, different types of systems, soil evaluation and maintenance.

KNOWLEDGEABLE EMPLOYEES ARE KEY

In addition, from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., a person — not an answering machine — handles all phone calls. After that, a pager service connects after-hours customers directly with on-call technicians, not an answering service, Weigt says.

Having fully educated personnel answer phone calls offers several benefits, Weigt says.

“It has a big impact on customer service when someone in the office can answer questions about, say, installations, rather than just getting a customer’s name and phone number and quoting them a price,” she says. “So many people just call around for prices for pumping tanks, like it’s a commodity. But with two or three — sometimes even four — people answering the phones, we can talk to all our customers, explain what they get for their money, and educate them. They’re free to ask those so-called ‘dumb questions’ and we can provide answers. When they write up a service

order for the technicians, they can do troubleshooting over the phone, which helps ensure our guys bring the right equipment to the job,” Weigt says.

“If there’s a backup, they can ask where the backup is occurring: if it only happens while the washing machine is running, if an alarm went off, if there was any electrical work done at the home recently, and so on. There’s a whole battery of questions they can ask ... that help us deliver a better product.”

Weigt acknowledges that this approach is more expensive.

“But it’s hard to put a price on building relationships,” she says. “The time we spend educating customers pays off, and in this economy, it’s even more top-of-mind. If people are going to spend money, they want the most for their dollar and to protect their investment in their system.”

PROFESSIONALISM PAYS OFF

Along with an emphasis on educating employees, Weigt and Olson believe employees should look professional. That’s why Olson’s field workers wear uniforms, which include shirts, pants and jackets.

“It’s also a good way for us to achieve brand continuity,” she adds, pointing out that technicians’ names are embroidered in pink on their long-sleeve shirts, light jackets and winter coats — a nod to the company’s fleet of bright-pink trucks. In summer, technicians wear T-shirts with the company’s name and logo silk-screened on the back.

Professional-looking employees aid the company in other ways, too. It makes it easier for the company to charge customers more profitable rates, and it reinforces the idea that employees do more than just pump waste. “What we’re doing is helping homeowners take care of their own personal wastewater treatment plants, and protecting their drinking water supply,” she says.

Technicians keep an eye out for problems with wastewater. Milky-looking water, for instance, might indicate that the homeowner is over-using anti-bacterial cleaners, which stymie bacterial action in the septic tank.

“Or maybe the sewage doesn’t look right — it’s orange or white,” she says. “Sometimes that’s caused by medical prescriptions. Sometimes we jet out laterals in a drainfield and find pharmaceutical capsules. It’s becoming a concern in the industry ... it prevents the bacteria from doing their job.”

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS AID RETENTION

Weigt and Olson realize it takes more than just uniforms and education to attract and retain employees. That’s why Olson’s pays wages that compete with union shops, offers 401(k) retirement plans, covers 100 percent of each employee’s health insurance premiums (but not 100 percent of their dependents’ premiums) and provides flex-time so employees can balance the demands of both work and family.

“We also provide top-of-the-line equipment and tools, and good education, which makes employees more confident and helps

them understand the value of their work," Weigt says.

In addition, the company provides comprehensive safety training that involves a two- to three-hour, off-site classroom session once a month. "It's not always convenient, but it's the right thing to do," Olson says. The sessions, put on by a local technical school, cost the company about \$1,100 a year for 15 or so employees, and cover everything from confined-space entry and properly securing trailer loads to safe trench excavating and procedures for handling emergency weather conditions.

Olson's keeps employees up to date on new industry regulations and trends with memberships in professional organizations, such as the Minnesota Trucking Association, the Minnesota Onsite Wastewater Association, the National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association and the local Chamber of Commerce. These groups also provide businesses with resources and guidance about everything from collection services to health and liability insurance, Weigt says.

"Most people in this industry run small businesses and are looking for resources," she says. "They're concentrating on the day-to-day operations ... it's easy to get myopic. These associations can help."

DATABASE IMPROVES EFFICIENCY

Olson's also relies on a custom-made, customer database-management system to deliver better service. The system keeps track of numerous key bits of customers' information, including complete service histories, the size of septic tanks, the distance from a driveway to the tank, where the cover is located, the pump size and more. That way, technicians are armed with valuable information that helps them work more efficiently when they arrive on site.

"If we installed the septic system, we attach to the work order an 'as-built' drawing of the system," Weigt adds. "It saves time for the technicians, and helps us quote prices more accurately because we know, for example, that a tank cover needs excavating. That way there aren't any pricing surprises when the technician arrives to do the job. We try to avoid having them out there squabbling with customers about prices."

The system also keeps track of each customer's maintenance schedule and automatically generates reminder cards that are mailed to customers, notifying them their tank is due for pumping.

Looking to the future, Weigt is examining even more innovative ways to market the company, including tweaking its three-year-old, pink-themed Web site and figuring out how to use social-networking mediums, such as Twitter. The company also needs to address a looming problem with waste disposal, which it may address by investing in its own treatment facility.

In the meantime, though, Olson's will continue to emphasize strategic maintenance and employee education and help customers save money. It's a sure-fire combination for enhancing customer satisfaction. ■



Jon Olson believes his company's pink vacuum trucks, a tradition that dates to the 1950s, helps build brand awareness.

Truck fleet is 'in the pink'

Back in 1954, Bill Olson, founder of Olson's Sewer Service Inc. in Forest Lake, Minn., felt his company lacked name recognition. To solve the problem, he turned to his wife, Verna, and her sister, Dagmar Berget.

According to family lore, an informal brainstorming session — fueled by a pot of strong Scandinavian coffee — inspired Berget to whip out a radical idea: a catchy slogan, "Keep your sewer in the pink," bolstered by pink-painted trucks.

"A week later, we had pink trucks," chuckles the Olsons' son, Jon, who now owns the company along with his sister, LeeAnn Weigt.

"'In the pink' was a popular 1950s phrase that meant healthy," says Weigt, who joined the company in 1994 after spending years doing marketing and advertising work for McDonald's Corp. "In our case, it means keeping the septic system functioning by maintaining it. Virtually every company vehicle with wheels — from pumper trucks to utility vehicles to a service van and a pickup truck — are painted an instantly recognizable hot pink.

"We have some fun with it," Weigt says of the pink vehicles. "But we also want to keep things professional — no icky slogans like, 'We're number one in the number two business' or 'You dump it, we pump it.' The guys sometimes get razzed about driving pink trucks, but they deal with it. It helps us build brand awareness."

With high recognition comes added pressure to deliver top-quality service, which isn't lost on Weigt. "We're definitely highly visible," she says. "So we need to uphold the reputation promised by the color ... the biggest part of marketing is delivering on the promises that you make. Otherwise it's just a lot of talk."

MORE INFO:

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