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Inside



All Because of You



A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO we put together the first issue of *IVT*, highlighting some of the successes of our extended Vac-Con family. The response was immediate

and overwhelmingly positive, so last summer we put together another issue highlighting even more of the people who make our extended family so special.

And here we are again. This publication is a reflection of Vac-Con's success and of all the great work you – our dedicated dealers, service providers, contractors and utilities – are doing every day. The stories in this publication are all about you, because you are the people who have made Vac-Con what it is today.

Thirty years ago it would have been impossible to predict where this company is today, with combination units, hydroexcavators and industrial vacuum trucks operating worldwide. And it's all because of you. We are 100 percent employee-owned and 100 percent customer-driven, so thank you for all that you do.

Darrell LeSage
President
Vac-Con, Inc.



IVT is a specialty publication produced by COLE Publishing, Inc. on behalf of Vac-Con, Inc. and is distributed to nearly 8,000 private, industrial and municipal vacuum truck owners throughout North America. This publication is dedicated to showcasing Vac-Con's outstanding products and industry leading customer service through its extensive network of authorized dealers. For more information on Vac-Con or feedback on this publication, our products, employees or dealers, please contact us at (904) 493-4969, or online at vac-con.com.

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Sanitary Equipment Vice President John Gregory (left) and President Doug Gregory represent the second generation in their Connecticut-based family business. Below: Service technicians Josh Torres (left) and Casey Gregory repair a water pump on a 2003 Vac-Con. The company joined the family of Vac-Con dealers last year.



BACKED BY THE BEST

New England dealership delivers everything the customer needs, with Vac-Con by its side

BY SARAH HIRSCH | PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER CAPOZZIELLO

When a family-owned company is entering its third generation of ownership — like Sanitary Equipment based in West Haven, Connecticut — it is safe to say it's got the day-to-day operations down. To build on that success, the company has boosted its product line and remained focused on providing top-quality service to its customers.

That's why becoming a Vac-Con dealership has been on Sanitary Equipment's radar for the last five years — a goal that became reality in September 2016 for its Stoughton, Massachusetts, location, followed promptly by its Connecticut facility at the end of October.

"Vac-Con has a reputation for being at the top of the field," says Sanitary Equipment co-owner John Gregory. "I knew from talking to other customers in the past that they are a quality outfit, and quite honestly we don't sell junk. If we're going to put something out there, we want to have it out there to stay and not have to be serviced all the time. There's enough headache in business today that the last thing you need is something that's going to break down and not be a quality item."



PRIORITIZING TRAINING

Training has been key for Sanitary Equipment's evolution as a Vac-Con dealer.

"Vac-Con is top-notch when it comes to training," says lead salesman Scott Black. "They've been with us probably every week since we took over: riding along with us, showing us how to operate the equipment, going out with us on demos. They've just been phenomenal."

"I couldn't tell you how many times I've talked to Bryce (Rieger of Vac-Con) past 8 o'clock, 9 o'clock at night and on the weekends. I tend to overwork, and it seems he shares that same

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The employees and owners at Sanitary Equipment Co. in West Haven, Connecticut, are focused on providing only the best products and service. Highly trained technicians and quality repair work to minimize customer downtime are a big part of the equation.

“VAC-CON HAS A REPUTATION FOR BEING AT THE TOP OF THE FIELD ... IF WE’RE GOING TO PUT SOMETHING OUT THERE, WE WANT TO HAVE IT OUT THERE TO STAY AND NOT HAVE TO BE SERVICED ALL THE TIME.”

John Gregory



affliction, so it’s a match made in heaven.”

Sanitary Equipment technicians went through a full day of training and have had the opportunity to get some hands-on experience, as well. “We actually have worked on a number of trucks already, and we’re getting up to speed. But with Vac-Con’s support it’s been easy,” says Charles Stoeckle, vice president in charge of operation.

Vac-Con extends that emphasis on training to Sanitary Equipment’s customers, as well. When Black found out that a customer of the region’s previous Vac-Con dealership took delivery but didn’t receive operator training, he acted immediately.

“I got in touch with Vac-Con, got in touch with (the customer), and we’re going out there tomorrow to spend the day to teach their operators,” Black says. “We’ll be there pretty much all day, and that’s just unheard of when it comes to a manufacturer willing to give all that time and money and support.”

SELLING ITSELF

After joining the Vac-Con family, it didn’t take long for Black to make the first sale. He and Rieger worked with a local municipality to upgrade its unit — an older Vac-Con model.

“I was able to come in with Bryce and build a unit similar to what they were running on an upgraded chassis,” he explains. “It was a really painless and simple process, and we’ve experienced that time and time again. It just goes back to the support of the manufacturer providing us all we need and answering all of our questions so we can talk intelligently to the end user.”

But as Black describes, it was more of the product selling itself than anything else. “I was in the right place at the right time and had that support behind me to where I could talk intelligently enough that it made the end user feel comfortable enough to move forward with the dealership. It was more Vac-Con than me.”



Providing first-rate products is only half of the equation, though; having strong support behind those products is crucial. “We had an experience not too long ago where a customer lost a fan on a pony motor, which is not a huge deal, but it was to the customer because they couldn’t run the truck. We were able to get the fan in overnight. Vac-Con took care of that for us. They paid for it, and we drove up and put the fan on at the customer’s site.

“That’s what gets us the next deal. That’s what builds confidence in Vac-Con and builds confidence in Sanitary Equipment.”

To Gregory, that unwavering commitment to customers is what sets both Vac-Con and Sanitary Equipment apart. “(Sanitary Equipment) is more of a homegrown, grass-roots type of business where customers know we’re in it for the long haul. We’re not just in and out for fun,” he says. “Whatever it’s going to be, we’re going to be in it for the long haul.”

READY FOR THE ROAD

Thorough maintenance is required after your truck has been sitting idle **BY KYLE ROGERS**

Your truck is your workhorse. You're always checking everything over to make sure it's operating properly, but you probably have a distinct offseason in which it's largely idle. Doing the proper maintenance after an idle period is every bit as important as maintaining it while it's in use.

"It's not necessarily winter," says Mike Selby, inside sales manager for Vac-Con. "It's coming out of whatever season is the slowest or the unit doesn't run and then preparing for the next operating cycle."

Selby provided a rundown of what's important to keep in mind when bringing a truck out of a long dormant period.

What's the very first thing that needs to be done to the equipment coming out of a lengthy idle period?

Selby: First would be to perform any periodical maintenance, even if it's not needed. Go through and make the machine like new again. We're talking about the chassis as well as the Vac-Con module itself. It would be items like filters. Whatever is on that periodical maintenance list, really focus on that.

What's the next step after taking care of all the periodical maintenance?

Selby: Run all systems at full output. In other words, run it through a complete wellness check. You're looking for the unit to fail. If it does fail, you want it to fail offline when the machine is not actually working on a job. Run vacuum system tests, run water system tests, make sure nothing is failing or leaking.

About how long should these tests take if done properly?

Selby: I would say a full operational test is four to six hours. That would be filling the debris body entirely to make sure all the sealing componentry is working correctly. Then fill the water system entirely and run a full tank of water through it to make sure that it's going

to operate at proper pressure and flow, and run all the functions to their full extent. If it has a 10-foot boom, run it to the full 10 feet and back. If it's a 270-degree rotation, run it 135 degrees each side. These machines have a water system, a vacuum system, a truck chassis that's totally independent, an auxiliary engine that's independent, and a pneumatic system. You have so many different components and operating systems that have to operate within each other. You have to make sure all those mesh, and sitting for a long period of time can do damage.

What would you define as the low end of a long idle period?

Selby: About 30 days. To cite a specific example, say you have a positive displacement machine. If it sits for a long period of time, and it wasn't properly stored, the positive displacement tolerances are so tight that they can actually rust together.

From your experience, what are the most overlooked items?

Selby: Seals and hosing. For example, if the truck sits and it's outside, it can be sun-beaten and things can dry out. Operators don't find out that the seals or hose are dry rotted until they actually operate the truck. It's not so bad on the intake side when vacuuming material into the tank, but it becomes an issue when you stop vacuuming. The material starts leaking out the back because the seal has failed.


How do different climates play into all of this, for example, with an operator working out of Minnesota versus Florida?

Selby: To use those two as an example, operators in Minnesota generally end their season when the weather gets below freezing. They



It's important to perform any periodical maintenance, even if it's not needed, before putting an idle machine back into service. Once that's done, run all systems at full output and do a complete wellness check.

won't go out unless it's an absolute emergency, so the machine will sit. You have to make sure the unit is properly drained, and if it wasn't you should keep an eye out for any water damage or cracked piping.

When you get into Florida you obviously have considerably different weather and the machines are more likely working year-round. But right around hurricane season from June to about September, the units are going to be in very high use because they're preparing, getting everything ready and cleaned up. Then you get into the dry season and the machines aren't as necessary and are used less. In Florida, I would lean more toward condensation as a concern. That's where you would have things like positive displacement pumps seizing up if the machine sat and wasn't properly lubricated. 

Mike Selby is Vac-Con's inside sales manager.

Equipped for Anything



Three generations and a Vac-Con push Ohio contractor into profitable new markets

by **Ken Wysocky**

PHOTOS BY **AMY VOIGT**

Sometimes contractors find it difficult to get their foot in the door with new customers. But Greg Franklin, the third-generation owner of Franklin Sanitation in Huron, Ohio, definitely isn't one of them, thanks in large part to the company's investments in Vac-Con combination sewer trucks.

In fact, the reverse is true: After the company bought its first Vac-Con truck in 2010, new customers started figuratively knocking on the company's door, prompted by word-of-mouth referrals. "It opened up new doors for business," says Franklin, who took ownership of the company in 2009. "Once people heard what we could do, our business increased substantially.

"All of our commercial customers want that truck (on jobs) in the worst way," he adds. "They say, 'Be sure you bring that big truck.' Buying a Vac-Con was one of the best decisions I have ever made."

That growth trend amplified in 2016 when the company replaced its first Vac-Con with a new model, this time equipped with a hydroexcavating package. Built on a 2016 Peterbilt chassis, the bright-red truck features a 9-cubic-yard debris tank, a Giant water pump (65 gpm at 3,000 psi), an 8,000 cfm three-stage fan and a 1,000-gallon water tank.

"Now that we've gotten into hydroexcavating, our business has boomed again," Franklin says. "It's opened a whole new opportu-



FRANKLIN SANITATION LLC

Huron, Ohio

Owner: Greg Franklin

Founded: 1952

Employees: 15

Services: Cleaning sewer lines and hydroexcavating

Service Area: 50-mile radius around Huron

Website: www.franklinsanitation.com



Greg Franklin and his son, Eli, of Franklin Sanitation in Huron, Ohio, set up their 2016 Vac-Con for a sewer cleaning job at the Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio. In addition to cleaning the park's sewer lines, Franklin uses the Vac-Con to vacuum up the massive volume of sand that blows into the park from the shores of Lake Erie.





Eli Franklin operates the controls on the company's Vac-Con, which has enabled Franklin Sanitation to take on larger projects like the Cedar Point amusement park contract.



nity for us. It's such a powerful machine, and it does just what we want it to do. It pulls us out of pinches and gets jobs done the right way. Having the right equipment for the job makes our life so much easier."

Franklin is also impressed with how Vac-Con treats customers. After he ordered his first Vac-Con truck through Joey Aquilino at Best Equipment Co. in 2010, Aquilino invited Franklin and his wife, Rene, to Vac-Con's production facility in Green Cove Springs, Florida. "We toured the facility and met with Darrell LeSage, the company president, and Todd Masley, the vice president," Franklin recalls. "Here I am, just a small-business owner buying one Vac-Con truck, and they treated me and my wife as if we were celebrated VIPs. That meant a lot.

"They are very friendly, down-to-earth people, yet straightforward, honest professionals — no messing around," he adds. "That's why I bought another Vac-Con six years later."

EVOLUTION OF SERVICE

The advanced technology featured on the Vac-Con trucks would have been difficult to imagine in 1952, the year that Franklin's grandfather, Glenn, established the family business. When Glenn retired in 1963, Franklin's father, Gerald, bought the company. Franklin started working for his father in 1977 when he was just 15 years old. At the time, the company owned one small vacuum truck and a pickup truck that carried several small sewer cleaning machines.

Franklin always thought he'd eventually run the business. "I grew up with it being a part of my life," he says. "I never figured I'd do anything different. It's a great business — we never slow down, not even during the last recession. There's a lot going on around here."

While his father took a more conservative stance on making major capital expenditures, Franklin believes it's a necessity. "The only way we can keep improving is to invest in new equipment," he says. "I firmly believe that updated equipment makes you perform better on the job and shows customers that you're serious about your work. Customers respect it when you show up with newer, professional equipment. And my employees have greater confidence in doing their jobs when we provide them with quality machines."

The truck is used primarily for cleaning sewer lines and hydroexcavating. The latter service is becoming more and more



popular for sewer replacement and new construction projects because the hydroexcavator can expose underground utility lines more safely than conventional excavating machines. "They might tear up the streets with excavators, but our Vac-Con does the rest of the work and they don't have to tear out other utilities," Franklin explains.

Franklin says he's always finding new uses for it, such as exposing foundation walls for repair work. "It gets into a lot of places where you just can't go with an excavator."

READY TO HELP

The machine has proved its mettle more than once. In one instance, Franklin got a call from an excavating company that



couldn't get access to a bad valve located 20 feet underground on a sewer line; there were too many other utility lines around it. So a crew from Franklin Sanitation assisted by inserting a 20-foot-long, 4-foot-diameter section of PVC pipe in between all the other utility lines, then hydroexcavating through the pipe to expose the valve.

In another instance, a local excavation crew was using a large auger to dig holes for concrete pillars that would support two new streetlights at a badly lit and dangerous intersection. But the auger kept breaking and workers had to keep removing dirt around the auger with a backhoe.

"They contacted me and asked if I could help. I dug both holes in three hours," Franklin says. "They were budgeted for a day and a half of work. Next thing you know, we're working for that company all over northern Ohio."

The company also uses the Vac-Con truck for more unusual jobs. At a large amusement park located on a peninsula that juts into Lake Erie, for example, Franklin uses the Vac-Con to not only remove sand from the park's sewer lines, but also tons of sand that blows from the shoreline onto the park grounds every winter. "It looks like snow drifts," Franklin says. "It fills up all their flower beds and pools. We spend weeks vacuuming sand there before they open the park in early May."

Sand that infiltrates sewer lines, lift stations and filters in water filtration plants also creates work on three islands in Lake Erie: Kelleys Island and South and North Bass islands. A ferry ride is the only way to get the Vac-Con to each of the islands. "We

"All of our commercial customers want that truck (on jobs) in the worst way. They say, 'Be sure you bring that big truck.' Buying a Vac-Con was one of the best decisions I have ever made."

GREG FRANKLIN

have to keep an eye on the weather," Franklin points out. "If the weather gets bad and the lake picks up, you can get stranded on one of the islands. We've come pretty close a couple of times."

OPENING DOORS

Looking back, Franklin is surprised and gratified at how big his company has become. "Dad always said he wished he could bring his dad back and see how far we've come," he says.

As far as the future goes, he anticipates further growth, driven largely by the Vac-Con and its capabilities. "Our Vac-Con has really changed our business — opened up some bigger doors," he says. "Our sewer cleaning work has skyrocketed."

"I'd like my son, Eli, to eventually take over the business. And if he does, I think we could cut back on some of our other work and focus more on Vac-Con work. We used to do a little bit of everything just to keep going, but now we're swamped with Vac-Con work. I don't see how you can be in this business without a Vac-Con." 🚚

The team at CM Equipment in Ajax, Ontario, includes general manager Curtis Friesen, office administrator Violetta Bengino and mechanic Kevin Evenden. The company provides the Vac-Con product line to all of eastern Canada from offices in suburban Toronto and Montreal.

NO CHALLENGE TOO BIG

CM Equipment tackles tough job sites in extreme climates and earns top-ranking dealer status

BY SARAH HIRSCH | PHOTOS BY BRUCE BELL

When one of CM Equipment's customers takes on a seemingly impossible challenge, owner Benoit Ménard and his team provide the tools to get the job done.

"We've gone places where we have to vacuum 900 feet away from the vehicle, which is pretty unique, and we were successful," Ménard says. "We vacuumed 140 feet deep where people thought it was impossible to do, but we came out a winner and we sold a truck because of it."

The 900-foot vacuum job resulted in a hydroexcavator model that's commonly used today: the Vac-Con Twin Hydro-X, which holds two onboard vacuum pumps. CM Equipment's customer needed to clean inaccessible quarry conveyor belts, located several hundred feet away and 150 feet down.

"That was really a first. We've done many other lengths before that were impressive, but that one was the longest," he notes. "At first (the customer) wasn't sure if they were going to be successful, but we went in and we won. We did it."



"We had put together special specifications for this equipment, and Vac-Con had never put one together before ... but it happens to be a cookie-cutter today. We build that model on a regular basis because of its strength and power."

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

CM Equipment covers all of eastern Canada for Vac-Con product lines, with offices in Ajax (suburb of Toronto) and the Montreal suburb of Repentigny.

"We can drive 14 hours straight north from Montreal to go to one of our customers," Ménard says. "I don't need to tell you at that level there's no tree lines — it's tundra, it's the beginning of the Arctic Circle. It's a different operation ... so the approach with that machine is a little different, for the fact that they're

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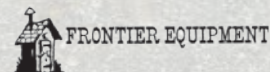


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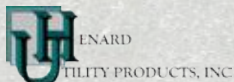


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Since 1987, CM Equipment has maintained a top ranking as a Vac-Con dealer. In 2013, the company took second place among Vac-Con's Best Sellers in the World. After more than 40 years in business, technicians are well versed in outfitting trucks for harsh environments, with warm air devices included in toolboxes to keep moisture out, and recirculating water in reels to prevent freezing.



“VAC-CON WILL DO ANYTHING WE ASK. THEY’RE GREAT FOR THAT. THEY’VE EVEN PUT FRENCH DECALS ON TRUCKS.”

Benoit Ménard

being built in Florida. We have to modify them right, left and center sometimes to make it work.

“We go way up north in the First Nation area, where there’s nobody but bears and wolves. We have equipment working over there in these remote areas, so once a year we need to go and bring the units back to snuff. We have to think about what we may need because obviously there’s nothing around. You have a place inside that you can work and that’s about it.”

Regardless of the request, Vac-Con works with CM Equipment and delivers the desired product. “Vac-Con will do anything we ask. They’re great for that,” Ménard says. “They’ve even put French decals on trucks after we translate for them.”

After more than 40 years in business, CM Equipment has a handle on how to “dress up the units” — warm air devices included in toolboxes to keep moisture out, and recirculating water in reels to prevent freezing, for example.

Different approaches to training are also necessary with the harsh weather. “Just putting a nozzle on the rodder hose — if you screw one on there and it’s minus 25 outside, you’re going to fight for your life to try to unscrew it to change it. So right



there it’s a battle,” Ménard says. “In the training when you deliver a unit, this is the stuff you need to show the customer that he’s going to have to face day-in and day-out. His operation is different than what you would have in Orlando. It’s going to be a different game.”

CONSISTENT TOP-10 RANKING

Since 1987, CM Equipment has maintained a top ranking as a Vac-Con dealer. “Since day one we’ve always been in the top 10. I think there was one year we weren’t there. I’m not sure why that happened — I probably had kids at the time,” Ménard laughs.

In 2013, CM Equipment took second place for “Best Seller in the World” at the annual Vac-Con meeting. “That was an exceptional year. I don’t think I played golf that year, so that probably answers why,” he jokes. “That was a good year for us.”

Vac-Con’s support of CM Equipment and its customers’ individual needs gives Ménard even more confidence in maintaining his business’ status as a top dealer.

“Vac-Con has always been customer-oriented, just like us. Vac-Con is flexible and listens to the needs of the marketplace; they are bending over backward to try to accommodate us, which makes us shine to the customer base, but the supplier has got a lot to do with it.” 🇫🇷

OEM PARTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Repairs are inevitable but you can prevent extra downtime and other issues with the right fix

BY KYLE ROGERS

Nothing lasts forever. Even the highest quality truck parts wear out eventually, and when they do, you're left with a choice: You can buy OEM replacement parts or seek out a less-expensive alternative, or sometimes even rig up a quick fix yourself.

But some key benefits come from exclusively buying OEM replacement parts, says Mike Selby, inside sales manager for Vac-Con.

1. Components are matched to the machine specifications

Safety is the primary consideration with this benefit, Selby says. Vac-Con uses components specifically designed to handle pressures in excess of the 3,000 psi the machines are capable of.

"I've seen guys make awesome-looking handguns out of galvanized pipe, but what they have to realize is galvanized pipe is only capable of handling about 200 psi," Selby says. "When you don't use OEM parts, you risk using components that weren't specifically designed for the application."

2. Downtime is decreased

Using non-OEM parts or various DIY fixes may save some money in the moment, but it can prove costly in the long term if it results in

extra downtime. Sticking with OEM replacement parts provides a stronger likelihood that the machine won't suffer from repeated breakdowns, Selby says.

"You may save \$50 on a specific component, but it could end up costing you thousands," he says. "A lot of times what ends up happening is there will be a failure or problem in the field. Obviously at that point the main objective is to get the job completed, but the thing to always remember is that an emergency field fix is one thing. That's OK in order to get the job done, but you must perform the required remedy as soon as the job is over. If you don't, it could increase downtime instead of saving you money."

3. Warranty issues can be avoided

Straying from OEM replacement parts could end up voiding the OEM warranty on the truck itself.

"I use the analogy of using a NAPA component on a brand-new automobile. It's probably going to void that manufacturer's warranty in lieu of using a Ford or GM product," Selby says.

Even if the warranty isn't voided, if a non-OEM part is found to be the reason behind a case of equipment damage, the repair could be non-warrantable.

And many OEMs, Vac-Con included, offer warranties on individual replacement parts, Selby adds.


"Even if the machine is out of the original machine warranty, that new component may have some type of warranty that could help should it fail within a specific period," he says.

4. Parts are readily available

Going the OEM route can help with availability. In the case of Vac-Con, Selby says all dealers have stocking programs that allow for customers to get their replacement parts quickly.

"Each dealer is responsible for a specific area," he says. "What that means for the customer is they can get the part through a parts counter if not instantaneously through the dealer. It doesn't have to be flown in from the factory. They can get parts in a timely manner because the dealers keep them in stock."

Another benefit of going back to the original equipment dealer for replacement parts is immediate notification of any other improvements or product enhancements, Selby adds.

"In the event there are any other equipment enhancements that could improve the operation or the overall life of the truck, the dealer would be able to inform the customer about that at that time." 



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Southern Vac's fleet of 15 Vac-Con loaner and rental trucks is the largest in the Southeast, and customer service has been the top priority since the South Carolina-based company opened in 2001.

PLACING PRIORITY ON CUSTOMER CARE

Southern Vac emphasizes good relationships, from the production line to the customer's job site

BY SARAH HIRSCH | PHOTOS BY THOMAS HAMMOND

Russell and Wanda Senn have a straightforward philosophy for operating Southern Vac: Always take care of the customer first. Vac-Con makes upholding that high standard a lot easier.

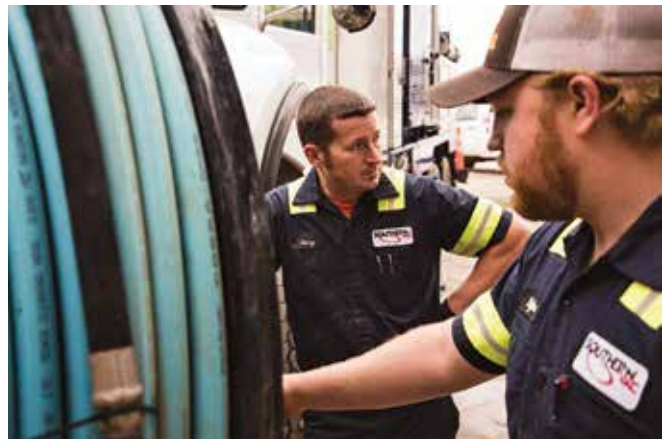
"Something that impresses me is the accessibility of Vac-Con to us as a dealer and also to our customers," Wanda says. "They make themselves accessible to everyone, and that means a lot to me. It makes it an easy product to sell when their doors are open at any time."

The Senn's relationship with Vac-Con has been a solid one since the founding of the company in 2001 in Lexington, South Carolina, when Vac-Con President Darrell LeSage sat down with Russell and helped worked out the details for the new dealership.

"Darrell has always fully supported us. And that meant a lot to us in getting established as a dealer for Vac-Con," Wanda says.

MORE FOR THE CUSTOMER

Providing excellent customer service has always been the top priority at Southern Vac.



"That's what Vac-Con wanted most, the customer service and knowing their customers would be taken care of," Russell says. "Darrell knew my personality and the way I would do business, and Wanda and I have always prided ourselves on taking care of the customer first."

That commitment to their customers was one of the catalysts behind Southern Vac merging with a large corporation, CTE, this year; Russell remains general manager and Wanda is the office manager.

"Providing our customers better service was what prompted us to move on and merge with CTE," Russell explains. "And of course having a large corporation behind us now, we're able

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Wanda and Russell Senn and the team at Southern Vac in Lexington, South Carolina, have made on-site service the focal point of their customer service program, ensuring equipment problems cause as little downtime as possible for customers.



“I’VE BEEN WITH VAC-CON NOW ALL THE WAY BACK TO ’97. THEIR QUALITY AND SERVICE IS SECOND TO NONE.”

Russell Senn

to have loaner trucks and loaner equipment and a large rental fleet. We have the largest rental fleet of any of the Vac-Con dealers in the Southeast.”

The loaner/rental fleet comprising 15 trucks has been a game-changer for Southern Vac’s customers, whether they’re going to support coastal municipalities in preparation for severe weather, or going to a contractor who needs a working piece of equipment while his truck undergoes repairs.

“The beauty of it is now we have loaner equipment if we need it,” Russell says. “If customers need it for a certain amount of time, if they’re in a tight bind, we have the equipment now that they can use for loaner equipment or customer rental, it just all depends on the circumstance.”

On-site service is yet another way Southern Vac keeps its customers at the forefront. “One of Russell’s strong points is on-site service,” Wanda says. “So anytime there is a need, whether it’s an emergency or not, that is our protocol. Our service guys will jump in their truck and they will go to the customer’s location to avoid that downtime.”

Service doesn’t just happen Monday through Friday, 9 to 5, either. Holidays, weekends and evenings are more than fair game when it comes to getting customers rolling again. “We just worked all last weekend and this weekend to keep our customer happy,” Russell says. “Contractors don’t like to put their trucks down during the day. They want to work them during the day and then let us work on them in the evening, and we’ve done that for contractors for years now.”

Having a top-quality product to offer is one more important piece of the customer service equation. “I’ve been with Vac-Con now all the way back to ’97,” Russell says. “Their quality and service is second to none.



“We just had a customer who thought he needed to go back to a competitor’s trucks and bought two of those. He ended up coming back to us and bought two Vac-Con trucks, and he’s trading in those other trucks. And he apologized to me. He said, ‘I’m sorry I ever strayed.’ He said he just loves the Vac-Con family.”

TAKING THE TOUR

Southern Vac not only forges strong relationships with its customers, but also extends that relationship to Vac-Con by taking them to the factory in Green Cove Springs, Florida, for tours.

“Our customers love this. Southern Vac has built the relationship with the customer to get to the point where they actually purchase the piece of equipment. When we take them down to Vac-Con, that relationship is then made with Vac-Con itself,” Wanda explains. “Every time a customer has gone down to Vac-Con, the president and vice president of the company take the time to meet them individually.”

“It’s an education process for our customers, too, because we want them to see how the trucks are assembled so they understand them better,” Russell says.

Southern Vac has offered tours of the Vac-Con factory since day one, and though there have been changes in ownership of Southern Vac, Russell and Wanda plan on maintaining the business’ family atmosphere.

“That’s important to us,” Wanda says. “We’re going to maintain the integrity of what Southern Vac has been for the last 15 years. Our goal every day is to treat our customers on a personal level.”

Nothing Like a Vac-Con

Longtime contractor Tom McLaughlin says he built his company, Metro-Rooter, into a major player in the sewer and industrial cleaning market in Jacksonville, Florida, in very simple fashion: Just adding one business account at a time.

But McLaughlin's approach to landing those accounts was a bit more complex than that. Ever since he founded the company in 1978, he's relied on a multipronged strategy for success: Invest in top-notch, productivity-enhancing equipment; establish a unique management style in which company executives, in essence, report to line managers; and just say yes when customers call — no matter how tough the job.

So far, McLaughlin's strategy has worked quite well. The company, which over the years has expanded into septic tank pumping and plumbing services, racked up nearly \$10 million in sales in 2016. Moreover, Metro-Rooter employs 59 people and owns a fleet of equipment worth about \$3.5 million, including three Vac-Con combination vacuum trucks.

Florida contractor pulls in municipal and industrial cleaning jobs with the strength of his trucks

by **Ken Wysocky**

PHOTOS BY **ROB HERRERA**

WHATEVER IT TAKES

"I've always had the philosophy that we'll take on more work than we can do, then do it anyway," says McLaughlin, 62, the company's chief executive officer and sole owner. "And I've made it a point to surround myself with like-minded people. We rarely turn business down. We just find a way to do it.

"In this town, we're the go-to guys — we solve problems," he adds. "We're like a sewer SWAT team. Whenever someone has a big atrocious job, they call us and boom! We're there and we fix the problem."

The Vac-Con trucks bolster that never-say-no mentality because their power and reliability give McLaughlin the confidence to tackle emergency jobs sight-unseen. The three units are built on Freightliner and Western Star truck chassis and feature debris tanks ranging from 12 to 16 cubic yards of capacity, blowers (5,000 cfm) built by Roots Systems, and 1,500-gallon water tanks and water jetters made by John Bean (80 gpm at 2,000 psi). Whether it's a 5,000-gallon grease trap that hasn't been cleaned in three years, wastewater treatment plant digesters filled with thick sludge or heavy drilling mud used to lubricate horizontal boring heads, the units are up to the task.

"When we run into the real heavy stuff, that's when we break out the Vac-Cons," McLaughlin explains. "They're fast and efficient. They pull so much air ... they just grab anything nearby.

METRO-ROOTER

Jacksonville, Florida

Owner: Tom McLaughlin

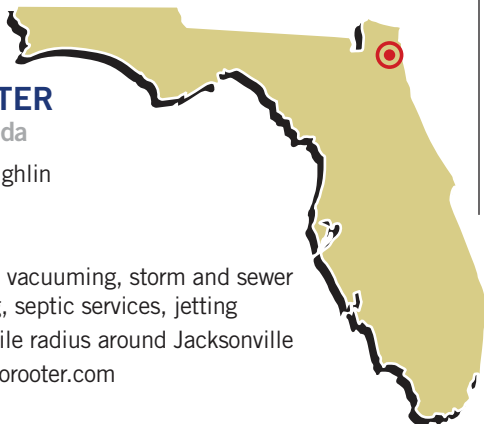
Founded: 1978

Employees: 59

Services: Industrial vacuuming, storm and sewer cleaning, plumbing, septic services, jetting

Service area: 60-mile radius around Jacksonville

Website: www.metrorooter.com





Brandon Burnette, Craig Boyles and Travis Daniel (from left) of Jacksonville, Florida-based Metro-Rooter clean an 8-inch residential sewer line with one of the company's Vac-Con jet/vac trucks.

Metro-Rooter's Vac-Cons have spurred the company's growth by opening up new markets it couldn't previously serve. In addition to sanitary sewer work, the company cleans sand from local stormwater systems, which requires greater vacuum power.



Stuff goes flying like it just got hit by the tip of a tornado and up the pipe it goes."

DRIVING GROWTH

Metro-Rooter bought its first Vac-Con in 1993 and McLaughlin says it was a game-changing move because of the truck's ability to vacuum heavy materials quickly and efficiently. As an example, he points to digesters and tanks at local wastewater treatment facilities laden with dense sludge. "We could do in one day a job that would take other companies a week or more doing it manually," he says. "The Vac-Cons made us look good. Once the word got out, we started getting lots of calls."

McLaughlin never intended to get into the sewer and industrial cleaning industries, but he has a strong background in municipal waste operations. Early in his career, he operated and managed about 15 small water and wastewater "package" plants (small, privately owned treatment facilities) for A.J. Johns Inc. Then he decided he could do the same thing on his own, so with the blessing of the company's owner, A.J. Johns, he formed Certified Environmental Services in 1978.

Johns was impressed that McLaughlin kept his vow to not steal away any clients. So impressed, in fact, that less than two years later, he asked McLaughlin if he wanted to buy the water

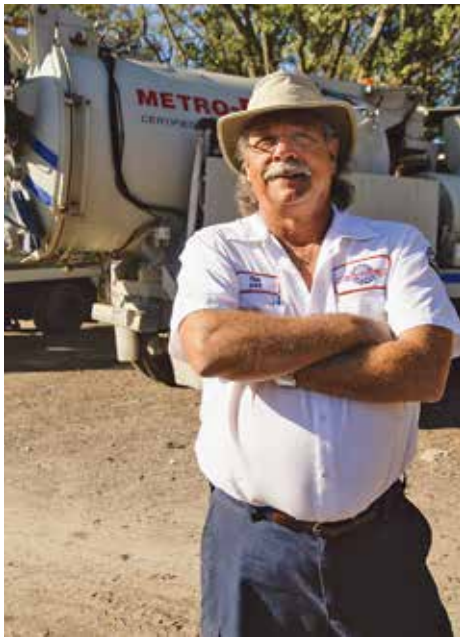


The Metro-Rooter crew includes (from left) Vac-Con and camera operator Craig Boyles, camera operator Brandon Burnette, lead Vac-Con and camera operator Travis Daniel and STP supervisor Pat Daniel.

and wastewater treatment division of his company. While McLaughlin definitely was interested, money was an issue. But Johns agreed to help McLaughlin finance the deal.

Operating the package plants inadvertently led McLaughlin into the sewer cleaning field. The digesters at the plants required periodic cleaning to remove built-up sludge, but when he'd call contractors to do the job, the service was inadequate, to say the least. "Their response was terrible," he says. "They either wouldn't show up or when they did, their equipment wouldn't work. I just got so fed up with it that I bought my own truck, a 1964 International that used to haul kerosene. It had an 1,800-gallon tank and a Mud Hog pump. I've still got a photo of that old rascal."

Metro-Rooter CEO Tom McLaughlin inadvertently ventured into the sewer cleaning field after being disappointed with the service at the wastewater package plants he was operating. In the years since, Vac-Con jet/vac units have played a big role in the evolution of his business.



“When we run into the real heavy stuff, that’s when we break out the Vac-Cons. They’re fast and efficient ... Stuff goes flying like it just got hit by the tip of a tornado and up the pipe it goes.”

TOM McLAUGHLIN

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Providing great customer service with an emphasis on honesty has been essential to the company’s substantial growth over the years, McLaughlin says. But treating employees the same way — with respect and appreciation — also has made a big difference in the company’s fortunes. “I never miss an opportunity to say thank you to a fellow employee,” he notes. “It gives them a sense of loyalty and belonging. They feel like they’re part of a team.”

Great equipment also plays an important role in great customer service, and Metro-Rooter’s Vac-Cons have spurred the company’s growth by opening up new markets it couldn’t serve before. “We can clean sand from storm sewers in Jacksonville Beach, for example, which is very hard to remove,” McLaughlin explains. “Unlike dirt and sludge, which turns into a slurry, sand compacts and is very heavy. But we can move it.”

McLaughlin also credits the company’s unique managerial approach. Instead of the typical top-down management style, he believes that executives and managers should effectively report to employees. “We always ask our employees what they need to do their job and do it better and easier,” he explains. “We accept and appreciate their input because they’re the ones out there in the field, doing the hands-on work. I believe that my job is to support our managers, and their job is to support their field


techs. We work for them. This system works very well, but you have to hire the right people, too. They have to be team players.”

While McLaughlin never doubted he’d be successful, he’s still astonished at how big his company has become, especially considering its humble origins, working from his home with a post-office box for an address. And the Vac-Cons were critical in terms of improving productivity, which in turn allowed the company to take on more work, increasing revenue and profitability.

“Even in my wildest dreams, I never thought it would grow into something like this,” he says. “My first account was a Dairy Queen with a wastewater package unit. For the first seven years or so, I never had a day off. When you operate sewer plants, you’re on call day and night and always have to be ready.”

Looking back, McLaughlin is also amazed at how technology has changed the industry. He recalls the days when workers used to clean out industrial tanks, for example, by climbing inside and breaking up sludge with shovels, then hoisting it over the tank walls in 5-gallon buckets. The only thing a vacuum truck did back then was suck the liquid off the top of the thick, caked-on sludge.

“The difference between that old International I bought back in 1980 and today’s Vac-Cons is like comparing a paper airplane to a Cessna,” he quips. “There’s nothing out there quite like a Vac-Con.”



Heil of Texas is a relatively new addition to the Vac-Con family of dealers, but owner Larry Davis was there when Vac-Con President Darrell LeSage founded his equipment manufacturing company in 1986, so the partnership is only natural.

STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEM

A long-standing relationship leads to new opportunity for a Texas equipment dealer and its customers

BY SARAH HIRSCH | PHOTOS BY JON SHAPLEY

Equipment dealer Heil of Texas provides only the highest-quality products for its customers. So co-founder Larry Davis didn't have to think twice when the opportunity to become a Vac-Con dealer came up in September 2016.

"We only have four product lines, and we want the Cadillac for each line, the premium product that has great quality. I consider Vac-Con the Cadillac. Then we add in our great support, and it's a win-win," Davis says.

Davis was there when Darrell LeSage founded Vac-Con, and he witnessed its growth and success over the subsequent decades. He even provided some of the chassis for the company in its early years.

"I've always had a soft spot for Vac-Con because I was there when they started. Darrell worked hard and built a great company, and I've always wanted to represent them. We finally got the



opportunity, and God help us, we better not squander it," Davis laughs. "Starting it took a lot of perseverance. Darrell had a lot of competition, but Vac-Con is what I would consider a tier-one manufacturer."

HITTING THE GROUND RUNNING

With Davis' nearly 40 years of experience in the wastewater industry and familiarity with truck chassis, taking on the Vac-Con line has been a seamless transition, fitting "like a glove" with the business' other three product lines: Heil Environmental commercial side-load refuse bodies, Palfinger/Epsilon grapple trucks and Schwarze Industries street sweepers and patchers.

"Prior to starting Heil of Texas, I worked for Volvo trucks. I primarily sold solid waste and liquid waste trucks and some oil-field trucks in my time there, so I got to understand the business,"

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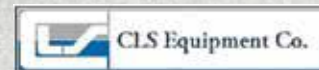
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“VAC-CON ABSOLUTELY HAS INTEGRITY. THEIR SERVICE IS OUTSTANDING; EVERYBODY IN OUR COMPANY HAS BEEN EXTREMELY PLEASED WITH THE SUPPORT WE’RE GETTING.”

Larry Davis

Davis says. “When we became a dealer, I had a comfort level because I understood the truck side, what the truck specifications were, and what was needed.”

In addition, Davis immediately hired an experienced Vac-Con technician to guarantee the startup went smoothly. The technician had worked for another Vac-Con dealership that was relocating, but he preferred to stay in the area.

“Quite frankly, when we took on the Vac-Con line, I stole a technician so I could hit the ground running,” he says. “I didn’t want my customers to suffer from my startup. I wanted to make sure we could take care of them.”

And he continues to ensure that high level of customer support by investing heavily in training for all employees.

“One thing that I will absolutely spend money on is training. You can’t look at the cost; you’re investing in the future,” he says. “We’re a factory-authorized dealer. Our customers expect factory-trained technicians and they expect OEM parts, and that’s what we provide.”

The training doesn’t stop with Davis’ employees, though. Customers receive on-site training, free of charge, as needed.

BUSINESS FUNDAMENTALS

The company adheres to five fundamentals, and Vac-Con fulfills those same principles: integrity, service, good will, product knowledge and follow-through. When Davis started his company, he had coins minted for all his employees; one side lists these five fundamentals, and the other side reads



Heil of Texas has invested heavily in training, and Vac-Con’s strong support system directly fuels Heil’s ability to serve its customers, who receive a high level of support through free on-site training.

“success,” which is the product of fulfilling the fundamentals.

“Vac-Con absolutely has integrity. Their service is outstanding; everybody in our company has been extremely pleased with the support we’re getting. The good will — we’ve built relationships with them, and they’re easy to deal with and friendly.”

And to Davis, Vac-Con’s product knowledge is without question. “They’re the ones training us, and they’re really good at what they do,” he says. “And their follow-through — when they’ve told us they’re going to do something, they’ve done it.”

Vac-Con’s strong support system directly fuels Heil’s ability to serve its customers, who always come first. “We are fortunate that we have really loyal customers; but don’t get me wrong, we can’t ever take them for granted. We still have to earn their business every day. If you stop and you forget that, then you’re in trouble,” Davis says. “We do everything we can to earn the customer’s business.”



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