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Stopping the Steal

This tiny anti-theft device literally is a non-starter for would-be thieves.

- By Ken Wysocky



On the Cover

Mr. Rooter of Houston co-owner and president Rich Vigil stands in the warehouse area at the company's office in Spring, Texas. Vigil owns three Mr. Rooter franchises in the Houston area. (Photography by Jon Shapley)

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Cory Dellenbach

Remembering the Updates

When it comes to software and tools you and your company use, it's important to keep it all updated to ensure productive work

Knowing and using technology is a must in the plumbing industry, especially in the 21st century with smartphones, tablets, GPS devices and many other items now being a necessity.

If you've ever broken a phone and had to go a few days without it, you know how important those devices are to you. Technology isn't the only necessity. Software you use on that tech is just as important.

The GPS on your plumbing service vehicles won't be any good if you don't update it often to give you the newest detours so your crews can find their way to a customer's home on a street that is closed. The tablets won't be of any use to process payments if the software isn't kept updated.

It's a pain, but you need to make updating of software and technology just as important as completing maintenance on your service vans and trucks.

UPDATING SOFTWARE

Every piece of software at some point in its lifetime will need an update. Whether you are using a scheduling tool, a billing tool or maintenance record-keeping tool, you want to make sure you have the latest software for that tool or app you are running.

For the most part, it isn't too difficult. Most software and technology out there will alert you if there is an update, whether it be a notification on your phone that it needs to be updated or an email from the software company. As long as you sign up for updates from those software tools you have, you should get an alert.

If you don't get updates, it would be wise every quarter to check for an update. Make it a routine: If a service vehicle goes in for an oil change, do software checks at the same time. Tie it to something that you do on a regular basis and that will help you or your team remember.

It's a pain, but you need to make updating of software and technology just as important as completing maintenance on your service vans and trucks.

ALWAYS BE ON THE LOOKOUT

It never hurts to explore what is on the "market" when it comes to software that could benefit your company. You could find scheduling software you like better or a different billing program that fits your company better.

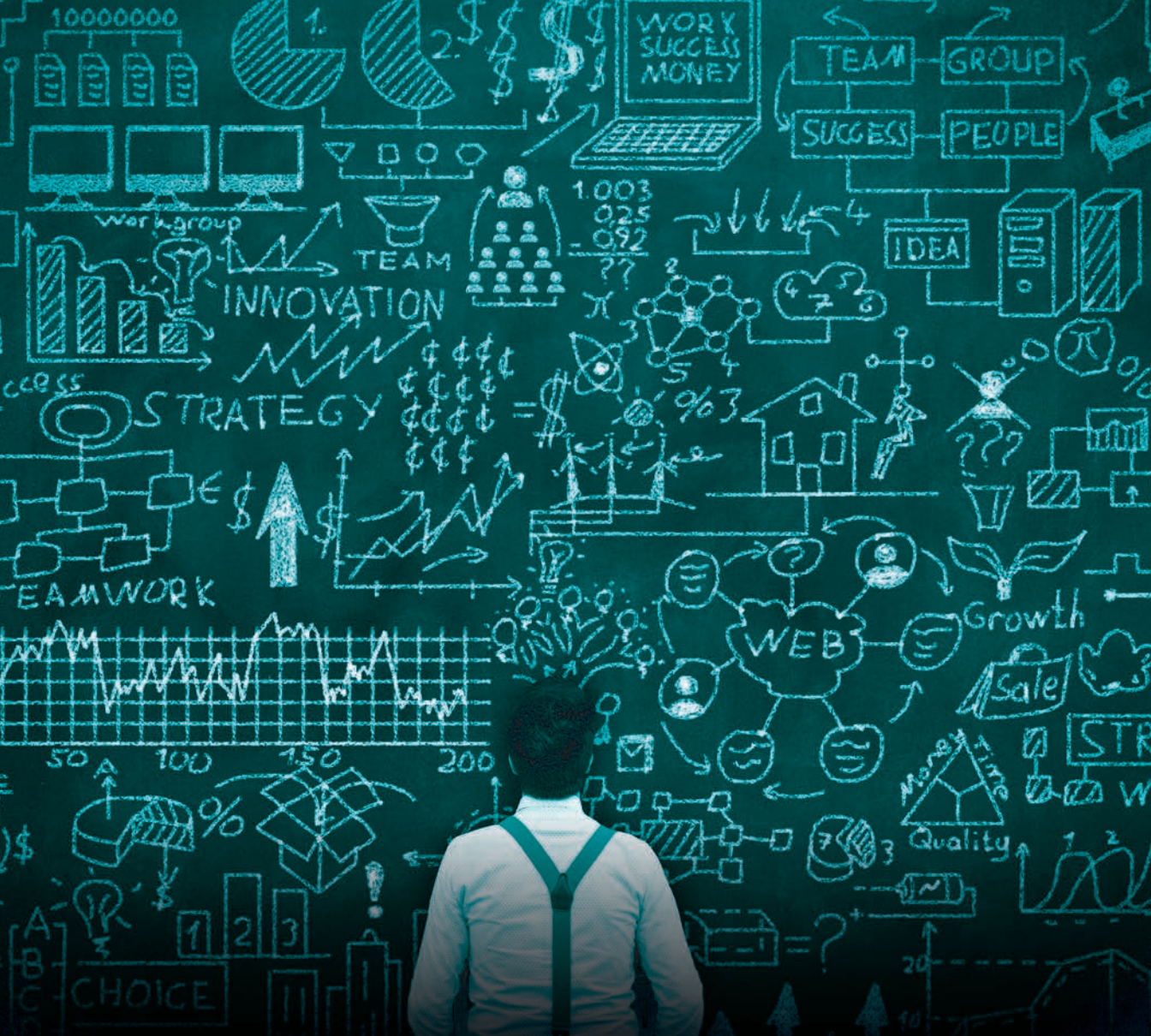
The same goes for the technology you have. Every few years when my phone is due for an upgrade, I take a look at all the different options out there for smartphones to decide which one would help me the most both with my work life and my home life (to keep track of kids' after-school schedules).

If you aren't doing that scouting for new tools and software every few years, you could be missing out on something that could really give a boost to your company when it comes to profitability, safety or general happiness with the crew.

YOUR TOOLS AND SOFTWARE

Are there software tools that you use on a daily basis that you would be lost without if it failed to work someday? What would those be? Let me know by emailing me at editor@plumbermag.com or calling 715-350-8436.

Enjoy this issue! 📧



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HITTING THE GROUND RUNNING

Franchise ownership provides Houston entrepreneur an opportunity to get three businesses started quickly with proven methods

By Ken Wysocky |
Photography by Jon Shapley



Ebbdar Inc., dba Mr. Rooter Plumbing of Greater Houston, Houston, Texas

OWNERS	Rich and Dannet Vigil
FOUNDED	2019
EMPLOYEES	17
SERVICES	Residential and commercial plumbing repair and service; drain cleaning
SERVICE AREA	Greater Houston area
WEBSITE	www.mrrooter.com/houston/

Mr. Rooter of Houston service technician Steven Smith, front, talks about a sewer line with service manager and master plumber Jonathan LeBron, at a home in the Heights neighborhood in Houston. The home was estimated to be around 100 years old, and the line was made from clay pipe.

Rich Vigil never intended to enter the plumbing industry. But faced with a career crossroads several years ago, the entrepreneur did some due diligence, weighed his options and eventually decided that a plumbing franchise would be the path best taken.

Today Vigil, 61, owns three Mr. Rooter Plumbing franchises that stand under the Mr. Rooter Plumbing of Greater Houston business umbrella. Their territories include Houston and surrounding Montgomery and Fort Bend Counties. The franchises turned out to be a great fit for Vigil as he navigates the last phase of his career and his experience with this sometimes polarizing business model offers insights for plumbers who are thinking about buying a franchise.

There are many reasons why Vigil chose to go the franchise route. One chief motivator: investing in the franchises instead of building a company from scratch allowed him to hit the ground running with immediate cash flow. At the same time, it gave him the opportunity to utilize operations skills honed during stints as an executive at several large companies.

In addition, the franchise system provided Vigil with a solid safety net in terms of job security — no small consideration as he watched friends and colleagues his age lose jobs during several of the most recent oil-industry downturns. Those sobering experiences prompted Vigil to ponder his own future as he nears retirement after spending more than 30 years in the industrial, oil and gas industries.

“I started looking at small businesses involved in something I thought I’d enjoy doing,” Vigil says. “We ran across the plumbing franchises and it looked like a good fit for us — the right size and the right purchase price.

Daisy Herrera prepares a quote for a customer outside of her service van.

“Because I was starting this later in life, I wanted to minimize any business risks. I also wanted a system in place so I wouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel. Plus I’m a hands-on kind of person and enjoy working with my hands, so the plumbing industry seemed like a good fit.”

PROVEN TRACK RECORD

Vigil and his wife, Dannet, invested in the franchises in August 2019. (Mr. Rooter Plumbing is one of 28 home-service franchise brands owned by Texas-based Neighborly company.) What made him think he could succeed with no plumbing experience?

“I have a lot of experience managing teams, so I wasn’t too worried about the business side of things,” he says, “but I also have an apprentice card and plan to become a master plumber so I can hold my own business plumbing license.”

One of the appeals of the Mr. Rooter franchises was the brand’s solid reputation in the industry. Another plus factor: The franchises use ServiceTitan, a cloud-based



▼ Jonathan LeBron checks over a water heater (Bradford White Defender) installation as he waits for a city inspector at a home in Stafford, Texas.



“Because I was starting this later in life, I wanted to minimize any business risks. I also wanted a system in place so I wouldn't have to reinvent the wheel.”

Rich Vigil

business-management system that does everything from revenue reports and digital invoicing to monitoring the return on investment for marketing campaigns and dispatching/job scheduling.

“ServiceTitan provides you with proven business processes that are fairly easy to learn,” he explains. “Having that system already in place was instrumental to our decision.”

Furthermore, the Vigils also were swayed by the company's code of values and an established customer-service process for technicians called the 14 Steps. This system helps ensure quality of work in much the same way that some well-known fast-food chains maintain consistency of products and services across thousands of stores nationwide.

“The code of values struck close to our hearts,” he notes. “And the 14 Steps explain how technicians operate from the time they arrive at a customer's home or business to when they finish. It provides great guidelines and obviously was already successful because it's been around for quite some time.”

ONE STEP AT A TIME

The 14 Steps provide detailed guidelines for handling service calls. They instruct technicians on a wide range of items, including where to park (in the street, not on a driveway); where to walk (on sidewalks, not on lawns); how to greet and break the ice with customers; wearing shoe coverings; putting down tarps and towels in work areas; providing a thorough diagnosis of a problem; and providing a price for a job before work begins.

“It serves an internal purpose, too,” Vigil says. “It puts all employees on the same level. When we hire new people, we can hand them the 14 Steps, which helps them develop sound work habits. Nothing but good comes out of developing good habits.”

The company's code of values essentially centers on the old golden rule, which advises people to treat others the way they'd want to be treated. More specifically, the values center on four main categories: respect, integrity, customer focus and having fun in the process.

► Daisy Herrera, right, gets tools and material she'll need to complete a leak repair, while Jonathan LeBron helps with the ladder.



"I simplify it by telling people that if they do the right thing, they never have to worry about the outcome," he says.

How does Vigil make what's often a dry and forgettable document actually live and breathe? The values are read at the start of every weekly training meeting and Vigil makes a point of citing examples of their value, based on technicians' actual experiences whenever possible.

"I try to pick out something that happened recently with a customer or a technician to show how these values are applied in real life," he says.

For example, at a recent weekly meeting, Vigil cited a complaint from a dissatisfied customer to illustrate the value of respect, which includes acknowledging that everyone is right from their own perspective.

"The customer said the work area wasn't left as clean as it could've been," Vigil explains. "The response from the technician was, 'He's always a difficult customer, and I left the area just like I found it.'"

He continues. "That provided a teachable moment. We talked about how we want to do better than that — how we should clean up an area beyond customers' expectations and convert them from 'difficult' customers to great customers."

EQUIPMENT COUNTS, TOO

Along with consistent customers processes, good equipment is essential to providing great customer service. To that end, the company owns about two dozen

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drain-cleaning machines, mostly manufactured by Gorlitz Sewer & Drain, with a few more made by Spartan Tool.

The franchises also rely on two water jetters: One trailer mounted Model 4018 made by U.S. Jetting (4,000 psi at 18 gpm) and a Brute jetter built by Jetters Northwest (4,000 psi at 9 gpm) and mounted in a Chevrolet Express service van.

In addition, Vigil has invested in 15 RIDGID SeeSnake pipeline-inspection cameras, two RIDGID NaviTrak Scout pipe locators and 12 service vehicles: five Chevrolet Express vans, three Ford Transits and four Nissan NV 2500s.

Technicians generally use Milwaukee Tool power tools, Vigil says.



▲ Master plumber and service manager Jonathan LeBron, right, talks with a customer as Daisy Herrera, a journeyman technician, waits in the attic to complete a water heater repair at a home in Katy, Texas.

SO FAR, SO GOOD

When Vigil first bought the franchise, he heard that it wouldn't be unusual to lose half of the employees. But no employees resigned, which gave him confidence that things were moving in the right direction.

Continued ▶

Franchises Are a Good Fit for This Texas Entrepreneur

Plumbers' opinions about plumbing franchises vary greatly. Some plumbers think they're the greatest thing since sliced bread, while others consider them the equivalent of a business straitjacket — accompanied by an expensive price tag to boot.

Benefits of owning a franchise include proven, built-in processes for training and customer service, marketing assistance, national brand recognition, buying power (through volume discounts) and a network of colleagues to lean on for free business advice.

Cons include high upfront costs, long-term agreements (typically 10 years), less independence and a certain amount of anti-franchise sentiment among consumers.

According to IBIS World, a global business-research firm, there currently are 253 plumbing franchise companies in the United States — a 1.6% increase from 2020 — with hundreds of franchises under their corporate umbrellas.

High initial investments and annual fees are two big concerns. According to the Mr. Rooter Plumbing website, buying a franchise requires an initial \$40,000, another roughly \$80,000 to \$187,000 in start-up costs, an annual license fee (which is a percentage of gross sales), a marketing and advertising fee that's also calculated as a percentage of gross sales and miscellaneous minor fees.

But for businessmen like Rich Vigil, the owner of three Mr. Rooter Plumbing franchises that cover the metro Houston area, the investment was a no-brainer, even with the high startup costs.

"A lot of people get hung up on a franchise fee; they feel that's a lot of money that could go to the bottom line," he says. "But I get a lot in return for that investment — things like proven processes and name recognition. I'm not sure I'd get the same kind of return on investment if I started Rich's Plumbing Service."

As for the independence-versus-requirements issue, Vigil says it's not a big deal.

"The company isn't hardcore about what you have to do," he says, rebutting criticisms that franchisees are constrained by rules and regulations. "If you do something different, but it's inside the guidelines and it works, they're okay with it."

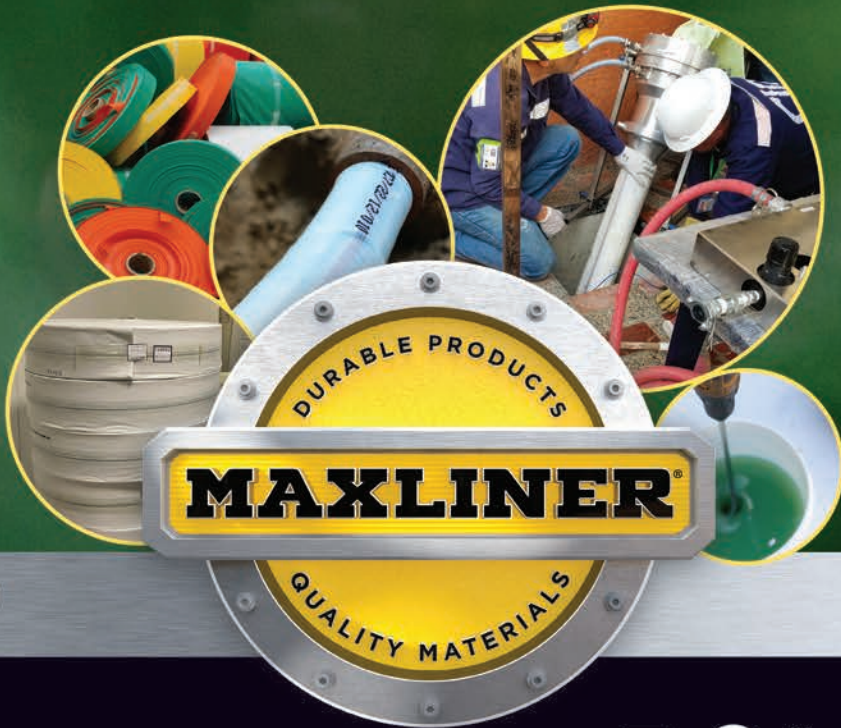
He continues, "But I'm happy to comply with the guidelines because they're tested and they work. To succeed, you need uniformity and consistency in a lot of areas — that's the bottom line."

"And quite honestly, if this was my personal business, I'd run it the same way as a franchise," he adds. "Without good processes, you're not going to be successful, franchise or no franchise."

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“I like running a good team and helping people grow. I get a lot of satisfaction out of that.”

Rich Vigil



▲ Journeyman technician Daisy Herrera walks a customer through how they will repair a leak.

Over the years, low turnover rates underscore the importance of creating and maintaining a supportive corporate culture, he notes.

“We emphasize transparency and communication,” he says. “I have an open-door policy and I try to talk to all of our employees every day — take the pulse of the company. Maintaining a great environment is an ongoing challenge, along with continually improving our processes and making sure we get a good return on the money we spend on things like equipment and advertising.”

Of course, there are times that employees leave the company for various reasons. Vigil says he recently lost three technicians, two who moved out of the area and one who decided to make a career change — but no one left because they didn’t like the company.

“If people leave for those kinds of reasons, then we’re doing something right,” Vigil says.

When the company needs to find more employees, a referral-bonus program — in which employees get \$500 if someone they recommend for a job gets hired and stays on for at least six months — is helpful.

“I’ve always felt that if you have a good organization, a good environment, a good reputation and good employees, your employees will be your best recruiters,” he says. “And that’s how it’s been working here.” In fact, three apprentices hired within the last year were referred by one employee, he notes.

“We even had two ex-employees that left the company under the prior ownership come back and we’re happy to have them on board,” Vigil adds.

GROWTH POTENTIAL

As Vigil looks back on his decision to invest in the franchises, he says he has no regrets. He finds the work gratifying, challenging and interesting, especially aspects such as team building and employees’ professional development.

“I like running a good team and helping people grow,” he explains. “I get a lot of satisfaction out of that. I always say that if you’re doing a job you like, it doesn’t feel like work. And this doesn’t feel like work to me.

He adds, “I also like working for myself. I haven’t had a boss this good for a long time, even if he is pretty demanding.”

Looking ahead, Vigil sees room for growth.

“This franchise once was more than twice its current size,” he points out. “So I know there’s a good opportunity to be at least twice as big as we are now. So that’s my goal for the next three years.”

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Stopping the Steal

This tiny anti-theft device literally is a non-starter for would-be thieves

By Ken Wysocky

Even though it happened a decade ago, Gerhard Kiessling still vividly remembers when thieves stole a Ford F-350 extended cargo van owned by the company he co-owns, Minuteman Plumbing and Drain Services, based in Garden Grove, a southern suburb of Los Angeles.

It's no wonder it sticks in his memory. After all, it's hard to forget the time your company loses roughly \$155,000 in tools, equipment, materials and truck repairs, not to mention a trailer-mounted water jetter, made by U.S. Jetting.

But Kiessling no longer worries much about the security of the company's 18 service vehicles, mainly Ford F-350 and Chevrolet 3500 pickup trucks, equipped with service bodies made by Knapheide Manufacturing Co.

The reason for his peace of mind? A Ravelco anti-theft device installed on every vehicle. In the past 45 years, no vehicle equipped with a properly installed Ravelco device — more than five million vehicles in all — has ever been reported stolen, according to the company's website.


"We install a Ravelco device on every truck we purchase," Kiessling notes. "It's the closest thing to a completely foolproof anti-theft device."

THEFT SPURRED CHANGES

Over the years, Minuteman Plumbing has tried various theft-prevention devices, ranging from aftermarket alarm systems to one that relied on steel columns that locked into place on a truck's steering column, Kiessling reports.

But losing the Ford F-350 van spurred him to search for a better security solution for the company, which

▶ The owner of Minuteman Plumbing and Drain Services in Garden Grove, California, Gerhard Kiessling, holds the plug from a Ravelco vehicle anti-theft device. He has Ravelco devices installed on all of the company's 18 service vehicles. (Photo courtesy Minuteman Plumbing and Drain Services)



Garden Grove, CA

COMPANY	Minuteman Plumbing and Drain Services, Garden Grove, California
OWNERS	Gerhard Kiessling and Tommy Burrows
TECHNOLOGY	Ravelco anti-theft device
FUNCTION	Theft prevention
FEATURES	An activation "plug" required to start a vehicle; base unit mounts on or behind dashboard, with steel-clad wires behind it; wires in engine compartment are disguised to look like other factory-installed wiring or hidden by engine components; lifetime replacement warranty; no monthly fees or ongoing charges; comes with a quick-disconnect keychain to hold the plug when not installed.
WEBSITE	minutemanplumbingservices.net



- ▶ The Ravelco anti-theft device with the key for it.
- ▶ The Ravelco anti-theft device shown installed on a vehicle. (Photo courtesy Ravelco)



“After the plug is removed, the vehicle will not start — period. Nothing. The engine remains completely dead.”

Gerhard Kiessling

employs about 26 people, was established in 1986 and does commercial service and repair work and drain cleaning throughout southern California.

“Pain and suffering brings change,” Kiessling notes. “At least it does for me.”

The thieves stole the truck, which was equipped with an aftermarket alarm system and so-called “hockey-puck” padlocks on storage cabinets while it was parked outside a technician’s home, he says.

The truck was found abandoned about 45 miles away from the technician’s house. The thieves completely stripped it of roughly \$75,000 to \$80,000 worth of tools, materials and equipment, including copper pipes, drain machines and faucets and other fixtures.

“When the van was recovered, it barely ran,” Kiessling recalls. “Almost everything had been destroyed — windows broken, steering column damaged, hockey-puck locks torched off [removed with acetylene torches]. In all, the damages totaled about \$150,000.

“Obviously, we filed a claim with our insurance company, but then you get punished financially when you renew the policy,” he continues. “When it comes right down to it, vehicle insurance is nothing more than a refinancing plan.”

THWARTING THIEVES

The Ravelco anti-theft device is designed to thwart thieves’ strategies, such as stealing a vehicle and driving

it to a safe location where there’s time to assess the contents and remove anything valuable. Thieves typically break a window, disable any alarm wires under the dashboard and start the vehicle by “hot-wiring” it.

But the under-dashboard wires for the Ravelco device are clad with steel to resist cutting. This forces thieves to use a less-preferred technique: Disarm the device by working under the hood — and out in the open.

However, all Ravelco wires inside the engine compartment are disguised to look like factory wiring or placed behind engine components. Figuring out which wires connect to the base unit is too time-consuming and risky to do while standing outside a vehicle with its hood up.

But the real secret sauce is the Ravelco “plug,” a small removable device. Each plug is keyed to a specific vehicle and easily attaches to a provided quick-connect keychain when not in use.

A base unit for the plug is installed in or underneath a vehicle’s dashboard. When the plug is inserted into the base unit’s receptacle, it completes a circuit that allows electricity to flow through key components needed to run an engine.

When the plug is removed, however, electricity can’t flow to those critical components, such as the ignition, the starter, the fuel pump, sensors and so forth.

“After the plug is removed, the vehicle will not start — period. Nothing. The engine remains completely dead,” Kiessling says.

DEPENDENT ON TECHNICIANS

Of course, the device only works if technicians remember to remove the plug every time they leave the vehicle. The company did have one truck stolen several years ago, but only because the technician forgot to remove the plug after parking the vehicle, he notes.



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“Through a GPS system, we recovered the truck fairly quickly and things still were pretty much intact,” Kiessling reports. “We were very, very fortunate.”

To ensure as much compliance as possible, the company makes every possible effort to keep plug removal top-of-mind for technicians; creating a Ravelco-minded culture is critical, he says.

“At our weekly training meetings, I always ask the technicians to pull out their keychains and show me their plugs,” he says. “If they can’t produce a plug, guess where it is? I remind everybody all the time about how important it is to remove the plug when they leave their truck.”

The device must be installed by Ravelco and costs \$649.95. Kiessling says it’s a great investment compared to the potentially significant financial losses incurred when a vehicle is stolen, not to mention the time-consuming hassles that ensue related to filing police reports, handling insurance claims and so forth. Or the revenue lost when a technician can’t work until another truck is available.

“I absolutely would recommend this product to other plumbers,” he says. “The only thing that can defeat it is human error.”

“We work off of the three-win rule,

where the company, the employee and the customer all have to win. If just one loses, everyone loses.

We live off this. If a customer is upset, for example, then the employee didn’t make sure the customer won.

Or if we don’t provide a great customer experience, our profitability isn’t as good, so the company doesn’t win.

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Richard Hart
Harts Services
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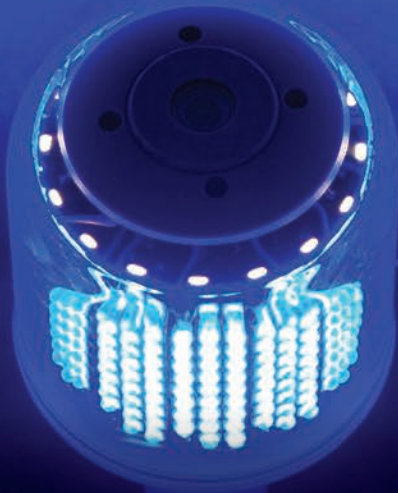


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Anja Smith

Stand By the Work

Offering long warranties provides many benefits including increased revenue, building customer loyalty and pulling in new customers

By Anja Smith

A comprehensive warranty policy can provide a critical differentiation point from your competitor. It's surprising how few plumbing companies are comfortable publishing a robust warranty program. Especially since most of us will bend over backward to correct issues.

Most plumbers stand by their work. So why are we all so afraid to put that energy into a written policy? One of the toughest parts of earning new customers is establishing trust. What could send a stronger message than a firm and well-articulated warranty policy?

An incredible warranty policy can increase your revenue, improve your close rate, build customer loyalty and act as an important marketing tool.

You all know this phrase, "You touch it, you own it." This mentality permeates the industry. Sometimes it's used with a sense of pride and sometimes with annoyance, but it reflects the reality of the situation. Both customers and plumbing companies expect we take ownership of a problem and see it through.

TAKING CONTROL

So in that way, a solid warranty is leverage. It creates well-defined boundaries, acknowledges reality, and allows you to control the conversation. Instead of being frustrated that "you own it," use this sense of ownership as a reason to increase your prices.

Be the outfit in town that offers an incredible warranty and charges accordingly. Use high-quality materials you are comfortable standing behind. Those companies will also have a warranty to back up any issues their materials cause.

If you are buying from a reputable dealer, there should be no problem getting manufacturer credit on the parts and maybe compensation for your labor expense. Offering

a warranty means you can charge a premium. This instantly increases your topline revenue.

If you've been looking for a differentiator to stand out from your competition and a reason to raise your prices — five year, ten year, and lifetime warranties are certainly worth a 10-20% premium to the customer. Customers will decide faster and with more confidence, even at a higher price, when they know you will stand by your work.

Basically, an extensive warranty builds instant trust and rapport with your clients. It's hard to get a customer

Basically, an extensive warranty builds instant trust and rapport with your clients. It's hard to get a customer to pay more for vague things like quality and customer service. They want tangible value, and a strong warranty provides it.

to pay more for vague things like quality and customer service. They want tangible value, and a strong warranty provides it.

SENDING THE MESSAGE

When you accept and even embrace ownership, it sends a few very important messages to your customers.

The plumber's argument is that if there are any problems with the installation, it'll show up quickly. "Anything more than insert-whatever-arbitrary-amount-of-time-here of days is unnecessary." I don't disagree.

But if that is true, then what is the harm in providing a longer warranty that matches the expected lifespan of the installed item? Match the manufacturer's warranty

on the labor side and your customer feels a sense of ease, confidence and security unmatched by most of the industry. It may be unnecessary, but it serves the important function of ensuring you'll be the plumber they call out next time there is an issue.

Warranty calls don't always turn out to be unchargeable. We've all gotten a call about a "bad install" that turned out to be a completely fresh problem caused by re-pressurized lines, stirred up water heater sediment or, I don't know, people not understanding that rebuilding their hall toilet has nothing to do with their kitchen sink clog.

Some of you also need a warranty program in place to save you from trying to fix things that you should replace. When you take the time to write out policies around this, it will also create some guidelines for your field staff. You are putting a hefty promise behind the work you are doing, which may help them think twice before changing out the elements on a 12-year-old water heater.

You can also offer a membership and tie your warranty period to maintaining a small membership fee each year. This means that you get that revenue slowly over time, but increase customer loyalty. When a customer continuously has their wallet out for you, they will call you for all of their plumbing needs.

"Unmatched Warranty" is a pretty great headline. If you have the best warranty in your town, you are giving a logical reason for potential customers to call you vs. your competitor.

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But what about the transferrable part? Okay, so the next 2-3 owners of that house are going to call you for plumbing issues because they will not be sure if it falls under the warranty. If the customer lives in that house for 50 years, you've created a customer for life.

Worst-case scenario, you replace a few bad fittings. Best-case scenario, you have a very logical reason to increase the price of that job because of the risk you are taking off of the customer and accepting yourself.


Because that is what all this is about, transfer of risk. That's why a great warranty is worth higher prices. But is it that much more risk? When you get past the initial fear response of making these claims, the simplicity of it feels borderline gimmicky. After all, how many people are going to forget about the warranty, move without sharing the information or just never have a problem?

TALK TO A PROFESSIONAL

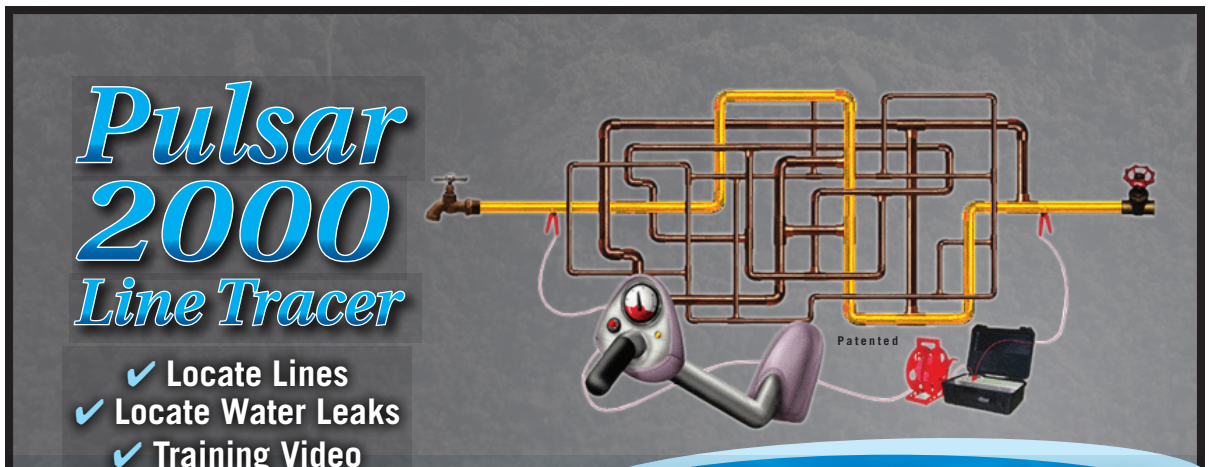
You can put exclusions in place, like high water pressure, cutting or drilling through a line and acts of

God. The extent of the fine print is up to you. Whatever lingering fear you have over this idea is healthy. But that doesn't make it a bad idea.

The fear about warranties is mostly unjustified, but it is important to put boundaries and bumper guards up to protect your business from vultures and fraud. Therefore, I recommend talking to a lawyer and getting a great exclusion clause written in fine print at the bottom of your invoice or membership agreement.

The pros can quickly add up and outweigh the risk. Maybe you don't have to go all the way to a transferrable lifetime warranty, but consider pushing a bit past your comfort zone. Or at least past your competitor's comfort zone. 

Anja Smith is a writer/speaker at Tradebiz Toolbox.



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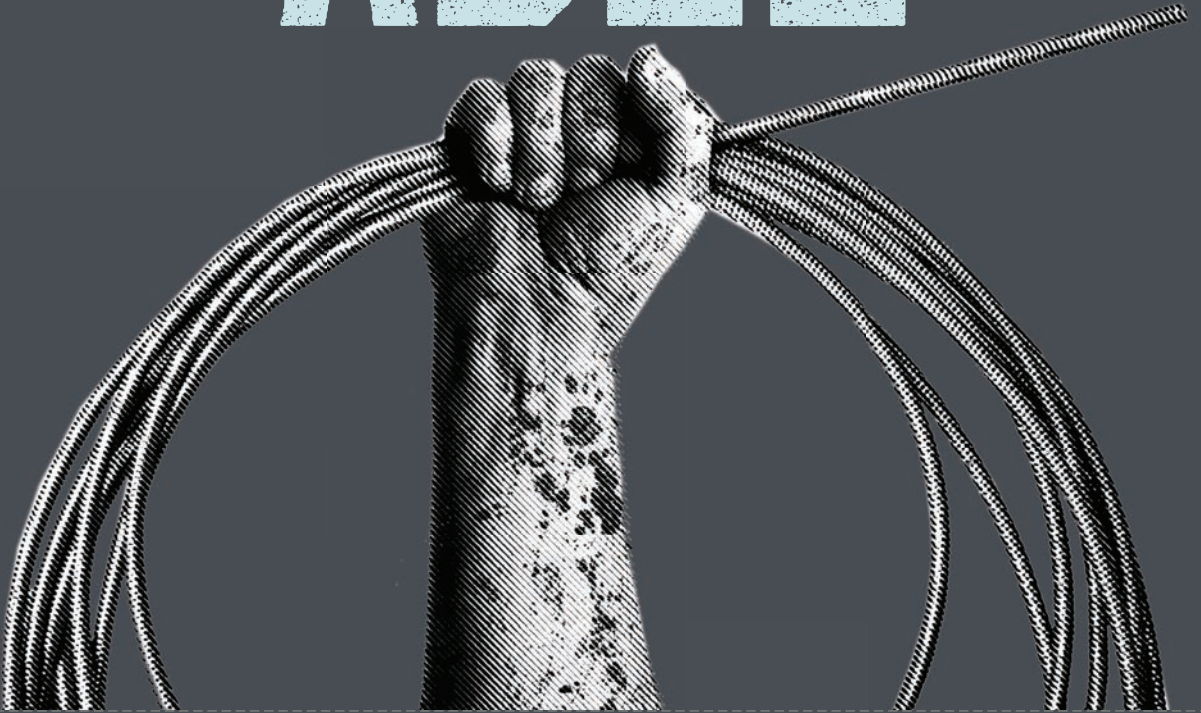


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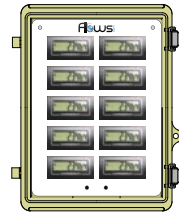


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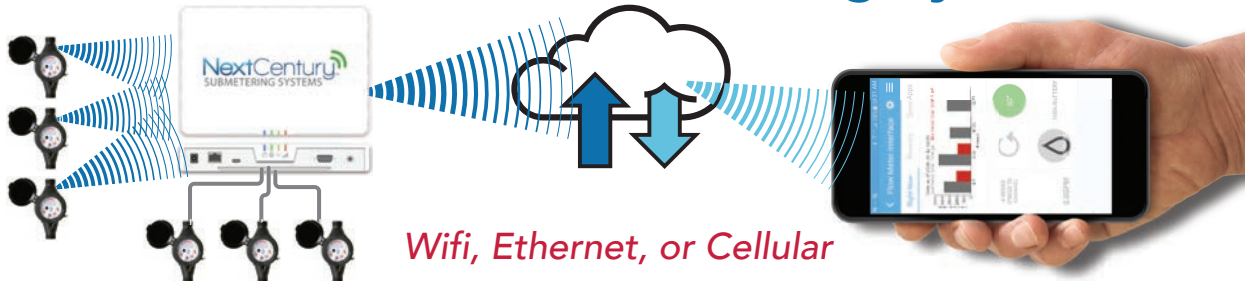


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Jill J. Johnson

Going Big

Even mom and pop plumbing businesses can benefit from focusing on the trends of a few important metrics to raise the bottom line

By Jill J. Johnson

Big Data is critical to business success because it provides important insights and information. Large enterprises use sophisticated systems to track data and often have internal analysts on their team to crunch their numbers. Or they hire outside experts to do it for them. Yet any enterprise can take advantage of Big Data, no matter their size, especially if you reframe your definition of “big.” You can use your data to better understand customer needs and buying patterns to further develop strategies that could impact sales. Insights like those developed using data become amazingly useful to any company, no matter how small.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF ANALYTICS

You've heard some people say, “I'm really not a numbers person.” Perhaps they use this as their excuse for avoiding data, much less Big Data, because they might feel reluctant to dive in and give it a try. You do not need an MBA or finance degree to begin working with the data associated with your business. Anyone can learn and understand at least a couple of the key metrics that impact how businesses operate and what drives financial success.

If you are reluctant to launch into data analytics, begin with baby steps. Start by identifying two or three key metrics you want to better understand about your business or your customers. Once you have these key metrics identified, focus on getting the data you need to better understand how you can increase your company's performance. Those metrics become the fundamentals that shape your thinking about strategies and actions to better achieve your business goals.

Focus on how the data — what you have or what you can gather — links to your business strategies. The key is to search for the critical data metrics that influence decision making. Look for the information that provides you with insight on the variables that impact your revenue and profitability.

USE YOUR TOOLS

You do not need a complicated computer system or major data management firm to figure out what you are already using in your business for data capture. Frankly, many small businesses are not fully utilizing the existing software they have to gather basic information.

Frequently, software programs have the capability to export information into analytical programs such as Excel. Once the data is put into an analytic format, you can do all sorts of evaluations based on variables such as customer demographics, profitability, geographic location, purchasing

Once the data is put into an analytic format, you can do all sorts of evaluations based on variables such as customer demographics, profitability, geographic location, purchasing patterns and buying volume.

patterns, buying volume, etc. Reviewing data points for various time horizons provides a comparison to see how much is changing during different time periods.

Engaging in analytical assessments of your data often provides valuable information on shifts in your target market and identifies new sales opportunities. You might even uncover areas of business vulnerability before they cause major challenges.

Many companies do not fully access the information they have already obtained about their customers. Taking time to input detailed information into a contact relationship management (CRM) system can be a first step. Consolidate the insight from your other information systems to develop a comprehensive customer profile. Then drill

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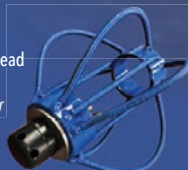
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down into the information on your customers and tie them to financial measurements such as sales volume, degree of profitability or key target marketing variables.

It is not uncommon for small businesses to have their most valuable customer information written down on sheets of paper or in someone's head. If you enter your data into a CRM or Excel, you establish the foundation for a more robust data assessment. Then you can begin to pull insights by looking carefully at key variables.

You will have a more effective way of targeting your desired consumers as you drill down deeper into the data to see which customers are most valuable to your business. You will be able to make better decisions if you are using thoughtfully mined data. When you get the data organized, you also minimize the vulnerability to losing important information if a key employee becomes ill or leaves.

METRICS AND DASHBOARDS

When you begin working with data, it is essential to create metrics and dashboard reports focusing on the valuable information so it can be tracked on an ongoing basis. Then set up the mechanisms and policies that ensure it is tracked by your employees. Holding your team accountable for reliably gathering the data and tracking it in a timely manner is also an important step to effectively use data.

You can certainly do some of this work yourself, but it might be even better for you to loop in key employees who may be better skilled than you at putting it together. Then you can review the information and draw conclusions.

Another option is to work with an outside consultant who is not going to struggle with a learning curve. Outside experts can help you discover details you might have overlooked while managing the company day to day. You are likely to gain better insights — and move much faster — by bringing in outside expertise for a short duration rather than trying to struggle through setting it up by yourself. Invest in learning from an expert and then take over once you develop the foundational skills and gain confidence in your own abilities.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Learning to leverage data is essential in cultivating the growth and success of any business. As you become more comfortable using your initial metrics, you can add on additional key metrics. Use a disciplined approach and continue to look for more metrics to measure. Have fun with it! You will soon have a robust data management system that you and your team can use to more effectively manage the business and customer relationships. This will provide you with new pathways for business growth and enhanced success.



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Service Vans, Fleet Management, Franchises and Software

By Craig Mandli

GPS/Fleet Tracking

DPL Telematics AssetCommand Base

AssetCommand Base from **DPL Telematics** is the complete tool for companies to increase driver safety and productivity while decreasing the costs and risk of vehicle accidents and theft. It empowers managers to remotely shut down their machines, wirelessly locate them anytime via GPS, collect odometer/runtime readings, track service intervals and receive real-time alerts for speeding or potentially dangerous driving. Driver ID options include iButton or RFID badges to restrict access to authorized drivers and correctly log each driver's activity. Users can also receive alerts for loss of power, boundary or curfew violations to curb unauthorized use. It is palm sized, has no external antenna and contains an internal backup battery to continue operating the unit if disconnected. To provide flexibility for seasonal usage, the device is billed on a month-to-month agreement, allowing customers to deactivate and reactivate anytime without penalty. **800-897-8093; www.dpltel.com**



GPS Fleet Consulting SafeFleet

The **SafeFleet** dashcam/GPS combo unit from **GPS Fleet Consulting** is designed to provide important benefits to any business running a fleet of vehicles. The easily installed hardware provides location updates and event-based video recordings in near real time. The data can be viewed from a computer or through a mobile device. It helps protect billable time against customer disputes and provides accurate accounting of hours for payroll, real-world examples for coaching against risky driving behaviors and protection against frivolous claims. It can help reduce the risk and cost of accidents, decrease idle time and help with proactive vehicle maintenance. It includes advanced vehicle diagnostic sensors and a safe driving rewards program. **800-609-7935; www.gpsfleetconsulting.com**



Quartix

The **Quartix** vehicle tracking system helps a wide range of businesses improve productivity, cut costs and save on fuel every day. Providing commercial fleet tracking for trucks, coaches, vans and cars throughout the U.S., U.K. and France, the system offers a host of features for fleet managers. It helps analyze data, generating simple-to-use reports that can be accessed online. Live tracking, driver time sheets, geofencing and management dashboards allow managers to easily see where efficiencies can be made. Driver league tables and individual driver reports help to assess driving style, which if improved can save businesses up to 25% in fuel consumption, as well as positively impact the safety of road users. It offers tiered packages to help businesses identify their best drivers, make sense of mileage and fuel costs and reduce administrative tasks. **312-800-9882; www.quartix.com**



Business Software

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FastPIPE plumbing and mechanical estimating software from **FastEST** is trusted by contractors and plumbers to help streamline the estimating process and improve the company's bottom line. All estimating programs come standard with a full comprehensive material cost and labor database. They include on-screen takeoff, pre-made assemblies, a large catalog of items and quick reports for efficient and accurate bids. With affordable purchase and lease options available and online training included, the estimating programs are designed to be efficient and user-friendly. **800-828-7108; www.fastest-inc.com**

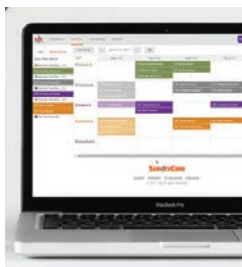
My Service Depot Smart Service

Smart Service from **My Service Depot** is a plumbing software system that functions as a direct add-on to QuickBooks. It adds scheduling, dispatching, invoicing and customer management to QuickBooks Pro, Premier, Enterprise and Online. This allows users to schedule and dispatch work to their customers using their preferred QuickBooks platform. It empowers plumbing businesses to streamline their operations and eliminate waste. When a customer calls, an office dispatcher will create a job in the scheduler, filling in notes and assigning it to a field technician. This sends an electronic work order to the tech's phone or tablet. When that tech arrives at the customer's location, they'll build up the work order, collect a customer signature, collect payment and send the completed paperwork back to the office. **888-518-0818; www.smartservice.com**



ServiceCore software

ServiceCore software is a QuickBooks-compatible, all-in-one solution custom-built for companies in the service industries. Through route optimization, scheduling, customer management, accounting and other fundamental features, it is designed to help companies better manage their schedules, customers and inventory. **844-336-0611; www.servicecore.com**



simPRO software

The **simPRO** comprehensive job management software platform helps commercial and residential plumbing businesses streamline their operations to increase profits. It helps businesses get full visibility into business performance with centralized reporting, connect office operations to the technicians in the field, automate invoicing and payments to increase billable hours, manage stock and inventory to control costs and track job progress to deliver the best customer service. **855-338-6041; www.simprogroup.com**



Franchise



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The **Rooter-Man** franchise system offers a low-cost solution to franchise ownership, with a flat-rate pricing system (no royalty on percentage of sales). Franchisees are granted an exclusive franchise license for their chosen territories, and they become part of a team of independent dealers working together under a nationally branded website and recognized trademark with proven systems for success. It has been named the top plumbing franchise by Entrepreneur magazine 15 years in a row. Franchisees receive equity in the national brand by receiving exclusive use of the trademark in their territory. **800-700-8062; www.rooterman.com**

Service Van

Hackney Service Body

The **Hackney Service Body** is specifically engineered to meet the needs of the modern, working service professional. Available in three fully customizable body lengths — 12 feet 6 inches, 14 feet and 16 feet, it easily adapts to a variety of service specialties and mounts on most medium-duty chassis configurations. The service vehicles are custom designed for superior work efficiency in a well-lit, open and organized workspace. Bodies come standard with a complete shelving system created specifically for the service industry. Made with lightweight and durable aluminum, the infinitely adjustable shelves are mounted on vertical tracks. Shelves can be re-spaced, removed or moved to another section to achieve the perfect layout that will maximize storage and efficiency. **252-975-8389; www.hackneyusa.com**



Shelving and Bins

Milwaukee Tool PACKOUT Racking Shelf


The PACKOUT Racking Shelf from Milwaukee Tool attaches to E-Track, allowing users to place the shelf in any location or onto any surface E-Track can be mounted. To keep contents secure during transport, the shelf features integrated tiedown points and an anti-rattle screw. A 50-pound weight capacity, metal reinforced frame and impact-resistant body provides maximum durability. The shelf is available on its own or in a kit with two racking shelves and two 20-inch lengths of vertical E-Track. 800-729-3878; www.milwaukeetool.com



Vinyl Wrap/Marketing Product

Stamp Works Magnets



Stamp Works can make refrigerator magnets that look like plumbing vans. A business owner just needs to send a photo of their van, and the company can do the rest, then send free proofs. Some customers put the small replica magnets on the outside of trucks, and as they travel people take them off, building buzz and positive feedback. 800-758-2743; www.stampworks.net 



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Service Vans, Fleet Management, Franchises and Software

By Craig Mandli

GPS fleet tracking helps plumbing company recover stolen truck



Problem: LeadingEdge Plumbing & Rooter suffered a small-business nightmare: the theft of a company truck from a job site. It was the first time that had ever happened in the company's 20-year history. When police finally recovered it, the thief had managed to offload all of the expensive tools and equipment onboard — which the company never recovered.

Solution: Immediately after this theft, LeadingEdge Plumbing realized it was critical they knew where their trucks and expensive equipment were at all times. After extensive research, they choose ClearPathGPS based on the top star ratings on review sites like TrustPilot and Capterra, along with the ability to get up and running quickly and flexible month-to-month service contract.

Result: They got the chance to learn firsthand just how smart their decision was to equip their fleet with GPS tracking units — when another company vehicle was stolen from a job site. “But this time,” explained the owner, “we were able to call the cops right away, and using ClearPathGPS’ live map view of the truck’s movements, we guided police right to it.” Soon after, the police stopped the vehicle, apprehended the thieves, and recovered the truck and equipment worth about \$100,000. Other results achieved include better dispatching and service as well as more accuracy with job durations and timecards. 888-734-0384; www.clearpathgps.com

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Product Spotlight

Bidet becomes more popular choice in US homes

By Craig Mandli

As people initially stayed home during 2020's coronavirus outbreak, some household staples were stockpiled a bit more zealously than others. In addition to hand sanitizer and face masks, toilet paper became a coveted item as worry about a potential break in the supply chain led to hoarding. While the supply issues were short-lived, it caused many to begin considering alternatives, including one long-popular choice in Europe — the bidet.

To answer the need for bidets in the U.S., Fluidmaster recently unveiled its Soft Spa 9500 Bidet — an electronic add-on to existing toilets. Designed to provide a more hygienic, clean and refreshing solution in the bathroom, the Soft Spa 9500 Bidet comes complete with water temperature and pressure controls, adjustable dryer speeds and an ergonomic temperature-controlled comfort seat. In addition, the electronic bidet features a sleek design that won't shift while sitting.

"Adding electronic bidets to the toilet has been a growing trend in the U.S. market over the last few years as more people have transformed their bathrooms into a personal spa oasis," says Corinne AndersonSchoepe, director, global brand, Fluidmaster. "COVID-19 and the recent toilet paper shortages fast-tracked our development of the Soft Spa



9500 as we responded to the widespread adoption of elevated personal hygiene standards."

According to AndersonSchoepe, the Soft Spa 9500 Bidet serves as a healthier, more hygienic way of cleaning up in the bathroom. Front and rear cleaning cycles help remove more bacteria and prevent the spread of germs when compared to wiping with toilet paper. The result is a fresh, "just

stepped out of the shower" clean feeling made possible by a premium, fully customizable experience.

"We've leveraged our trusted leadership in the toilet repair industry to offer a premium, more hygienic solution that we believe is going to be a welcomed upgrade in the bathroom," she says.

The Soft Spa 9500 Bidet includes automatic front and rear cleaning cycles with oscillation, water temperature and pressure controls; adjustable dryer speeds with temperature control; a sleek design with an ergonomic comfort bidet seat that won't shift, featuring adjustable temperature control; electronic control via push button at bidet base or wireless remote; a deodorizer and push-button quick release for easy cleaning; and a night light and soft-close bidet seat lid for round-the-clock use. 949-728-2000; www.fluidmaster.com

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Liberty Pumps LCU-PR Series plenum-rated condensate pumps

The LCU-PR Series plenum-rated condensate pumps from Liberty Pumps are approved for installation directly in plenums. The pumps are designed for removal of condensate from air conditioning, refrigeration and dehumidification equipment installed in air-handling and plenum applications that have limited space. The LCU-PR pumps meet UL Standard 2043 for plenum applications and are available in both 115 and 230 volts. **800-543-2550; www.libertypumps.com**

Grundfos high-efficiency IE5 motors and pumps

Grundfos' E-pumps with integrated frequency converter are designed for total control, customer convenience and environmental sustainability. Grundfos' MGE E-motors exceed the IE5 requirements by more than 2% with a motor efficiency of 95.7% at 380 V/2, 600 rpm. The built-in application control in MGE E-motors reduces not only the energy consumption of the pump, but also optimizes the performance and efficiency of the entire system. The permanent magnet synchronous motors (PMSM) are designed specifically for frequency converter operations and optimized for pump applications and high part-load efficiency. The PMSM also has a built-in frequency converter that enables variable-speed operation with benefits in pump applications ranging from energy savings, process control, extra functionalities, built-in motor protection, higher performance and more compact pumps, reduced water hammer due to long ramp times and low starting currents. **800-926-6688; www.grundfos.com/us**



Laars Heating Systems Powered by Keltech line of water heaters

Laars Heating Systems launched its new Powered by Keltech family of commercial and industrial electric tankless water heaters. Features include a PID infinitely modulating control which holds temperature as demand changes; Incoloy 800 low-watt density elements that enhance durability, heat transfer and resistance to scaling; low water flow activation; low water pressure drop; brass/copper heat exchangers that are



NSF/ANSI 372 certified for lead free; and space saving size, with only 3 square feet of space needed for 491,000 Btu/h. The water heaters are available in four different models and configurations for commercial and light industrial use, including the commercial H Series, the light industrial G Series, the light industrial F Series and the large industrial N Series. **800-900-9276; www.laars.com**

Webstone Magnetic boiler Filter XL model

Webstone, a brand of NIBCO, has a new Magnetic Boiler Filter XL model. Available in 1 1/4- and 1 1/2-inch sizes, the MBF XL is designed for larger residential boilers and is commonly installed on the system run. The high-powered 12,000 Gauss magnet captures ferrous particles from the system before it reaches the boiler, with an integral drain valve and service tool to remove the accumulated debris. It is available with a choice of press, FIP, MIP or SWT union connections to join to system piping. **800-336-5133; www.webstonevalves.com**



Franklin Electric Little Giant 16G Series 1 hp grinder pump

Franklin Electric's Little Giant 16G Series is a heavy-duty 1 hp grinder pump designed to deliver power as a new or replacement pump for the most challenging residential and light commercial wastewater applications. This new pump is available in both 115 or 230 volt models. The cutting mechanism produces over 745,000 cuts per minute and is based on the design used in larger Franklin Electric models. The forceful 1 hp class F motor provides optimal power to prevent flushables and other debris from clogging and causing downtime, while the discharge is customizable to a contractor's needs. Installers can choose to use the 1 1/4-inch discharge or utilize the 2-inch adapter pre-assembled to the pump, making it an ideal drop-in replacement for any effluent or sewage pump struggling with clogs and binding, regardless of discharge size. **866-271-2859; www.franklinengineered.com**



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Milwaukee Tool expanding corporate operations

Milwaukee Tool announced the expansion of its corporate operations into downtown Milwaukee. The company's current global headquarters in Brookfield, Wisconsin, will remain the central location for the company's corporate operations. Anticipated to open in October, the building will house 1,200 employees within the next three years.

ServiceTitan expands with Salt Lake City office, adds VP

ServiceTitan announced it will open an office in the greater Salt Lake City region. As the company's fifth office location, the new office will serve multiple functions, including as a global center for ServiceTitan customer support. ServiceTitan also announced that it has brought on Kim Park, vice president of global customer support, to lead the company's initiative to hire customer experience talent in the region. As a longtime Utah resident, Park brings more than fifteen years' experience growing and scaling customer support organizations in the Salt Lake City region.

Italian brand Foster selects Water Inc. as U.S. distributor

Water Inc. was named as the U.S. distributor for Italian brand Foster's plumbing line. The company will represent the brand's plumbing products in Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah.

Waterless earns National Green Building Certification

Waterless Co. earned National Green Building Standard Certification from the National Association of Homebuilders' Home Innovation Research Labs. The NGBS is an ANSI-approved green building certification program that focuses on single-family and multi-family residential buildings and remodeling projects.



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Watts offers course on mitigating Legionella risk

Mitigating the Risk of *Legionella* is a new eight-module online course from Watts for facility managers, engineers and infection control professionals. In this 2 1/2-hour course, industry experts explain points of *Legionella* risk in a building's premise plumbing system, best practices for testing and monitoring, current design trends and more. To preview or to register, go to LegionellaCourses.com

Bradford White and Plumbers Without Borders join forces

Bradford White Corp. partnered with Plumbers Without Borders, a grassroots nonprofit organization working to increase global access to safe water and sanitation. The partnership supports Plumbers Without Borders' ongoing contributions to professional training, promoting careers in the trades and maintaining the industry's commitment to the highest standards of quality for products and services.

Uponor appoints Michael Rauterkus as president and CEO

Uponor's board of directors appointed Michael Rauterkus as president and CEO of Uponor Group and chairman of the executive committee. He will join the company and assume the CEO responsibility in August.



Rinnai launches business development initiative

Rinnai America Corp. created a strategic business development team to pursue acquisitions and partnership opportunities that expand its product offerings in new and existing categories. The company began its domestic manufacturing strategy in 2018 with the opening of a facility in Griffin, Georgia. In 2020, Rinnai announced the opening of its new Innovation Center of Excellence located in Peachtree City, Georgia. A new factory located on a 60-acre Greenfield site, also in Griffin, is scheduled to open later in 2021. **PI**

Send us your plumbing industry news: Email personnel, business acquisitions and related plumbing news, photos and videos to editor@plumbermag.com.

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Aug. 24-26

Legionella Conference, virtual only.
Visit www.legionellaconference.org

Sept. 14-15

Wastewater Equipment (WEQ) Fair,
Nissan Stadium, Nashville, Tennessee. Visit weqfair.com

Sept. 21-24

Service World Expo,
Louisville International Convention Center,
Louisville, Kentucky. Visit www.serviceworldexpo.com

Sept. 22-26

**American Society of Plumbing
Engineers (ASPE) Tech Symposium**,
San Diego Marriott Mission Valley, San Diego.
Visit www.aspe.org

Sept. 26-30

**International Association of Plumbing and
Mechanical Officials 92nd Annual Education
and Business Conference**,
Hyatt Regency San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas.
Visit www.iapmo.org

Oct. 8

Northwest Wisconsin Plumbing Seminar,
Sleep Inn & Suites Conference Center, Eau Claire, Wisconsin.
Visit <https://phcc-wi.org/plumbing-seminars/>

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