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Humbert Sanitary's Larry Froelich operates a trackhoe on a sump chamber installation job while Chris Rothwell shoots an elevation.

Preaching Quality

Employees at Humbert Sanitary Service get a steady diet of job-specific training and instruction in company expectations

By Mary Shafer

Mike Humbert believes his company developed an excellent reputation by doing things the right way — on the easiest and the toughest jobs.

For Mike, owner of Humbert Sanitary Service, Inc., in North Canton, Ohio, the right way means a commitment to safety and quality. "We like to shine in every area," he says. Putting that polish on every Humbert employee begins with training, which is part of the company culture.

Mike and his 11 field crew members have 150 years of combined experience. Some of his team have been with him for more than 20 years.

FROM DAY ONE

Training begins with a new employee's first day in the field. "A lot of it comes on the job until a seminar comes up," Mike says. "I'll get new hires into the field, rotating through all the different jobs and functions, and on every route."

"Then I personally sit down with them after they've been out for a month, so they're familiar with the type of situations they'll run into. I

talk about potential problems and solutions, and answer any questions they have."

Mike puts great store in the value of formal industry education. "One of the things I've always strived for is professionalism," he says. "The classroom training has led to us becoming a safer company." He sends crew members to general as well as job-specific training, such as first aid, CPR, and related electrical courses.

He also takes advantage of manufacturers' product certification classes and industry association training programs. Recently, several of his technicians achieved Qualified Installer certification through the Ohio Onsite Wastewater Association.

Mike expresses surprise at how many companies choose not to get involved in training and certification updates. "You've got to keep up with it, or you get behind," he says. "All the new rules and regulations are going to weed out those who don't stay ahead of the game."

In the interest of staying out in front, Mike is exploring hiring an outside consulting firm to handle extra

Profile

Humbert Sanitary Service, Inc.

North Canton, Ohio



President:	Mike Humbert
Founded:	1969
Employees:	14
Fleet:	3 pumpers, flusher, 3 service vans, excavating equipment
Service area:	Northeast Ohio
Specialties:	Septic system design, installation and maintenance
Affiliations:	Ohio Waste Haulers Association, Ohio Onsite Wastewater Association, National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association, National Association of Wastewater Transporters
Web site:	www.humbertsanitary.com

safety training. He already contracts for services such as Toolbox Chat brochures that contain project tips and information.

ON THE JOB SITE

Fieldwork offers great opportunities for realistic situational exercises. "We do trench protection and confined space training," Mike explains.

"Confined space work is expensive because of the cost of safety equip-

ment. Some people are always trying to cut corners, but we won't do it. We follow the rules and protect our employees. We've lost work because we refuse unsafe jobs." Humbert provides its own trench box and rents any other equipment necessary to create a safe environment for a given project.

Employees are required to take company-specific training. All new hires must read and sign a copy of the employee manual Mike has formulat-



Karl Rice pumps and cleans a lift station that was being retrofitted with new components.

bring in their equipment for work on remote jobs. That means Humbert Sanitary doesn't have to make long hauls with its own vehicles. This flexibility opens the door to remote projects the company otherwise wouldn't get.

Humbert doesn't do plumbing, but does deal with licensed plumbers, subcontracting work to them when necessary and getting referrals in return.

A NATURAL

Mike came by his business savvy naturally. He worked through high school for his uncle, Tim Humbert, who

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Mike Humbert

ran a pumping truck and drain cleaning service out of a barn. After getting a two-year business management degree, he began working full-time in 1974 as a replacement for the firm's secretary.

When he felt he had learned enough about the administrative end of the business and "got tired of sitting inside," he hired another secretary and started making drain service calls. In 1981, at age 27, he bought the business.

Being mechanically inclined, Mike leaned toward working for large companies with package treatment plants that required ongoing maintenance and repair. He won numerous contracts with Standard Oil and still works for that company now, as BP. He won most of his large accounts through word-of-mouth from satisfied plant managers.

This success allowed him to build a fleet of two Ford pumpers with 2,500-gallon tanks and a Freightliner pumper with a Progress tank. For drain work,



Chris Rothwell helps with installation of an oil interceptor required for a coin-operated car wash.



Doug White (on ground) and Larry Froelich install an aeration system on a heavily wooded site.

Education Does Double Duty

Mike Humbert believes that educating customers is good for marketing and an investment in his business.

He begins each Monday morning with a look through the newspaper's real estate transfer listings. Familiar with areas on septic systems, he updates his customer database with the new owner's name, prints out a service reminder and mails it with a pamphlet, "The Home Buyer's Guide to Septic Systems."

This keeps competitors from moving in on his accounts by leveraging his status as the existing service supplier. It also generates goodwill with the new homeowner. He sometimes loans customers a copy of the Small Flows Clearinghouse video, "How Septic

Systems Work." He also posts homeowner information on his web site and refers cyber-savvy customers there.

The follow-through comes on the back of all Humbert invoices. There, a diagram of a typical septic tank helps people correlate with checkmarks on the front in the Explanation of Elements section.

Mike believes these extras create more educated customers who appreciate the value and expertise Humbert Sanitary brings to the job. Customers gain respect and confidence in his crews, and that helps justify his slightly higher rates. "People do understand the concept of getting what you pay for," he says.

he has two Ford service vans. He also owns a utility box truck, a four-door crew cab pickup with a box, a track hoe, a skid steer, and a dump truck.

KEEPING TRACK

The business is about evenly split between residential and commercial work. One of Mike's challenges is staying on top of scheduling. He hired a local programmer to set up the Microsoft Access database on which he manages most of the operation. The database was built by keying in data from an old index card record system. It uses the location address to identify systems.

After each service call, all pertinent data — date, time, customer representative and more, is keyed into the database, building a work history for each system. Mike says this record protects against bogus claims.

"You can use this information to shut down a lot of complaints," he says. "If you can tell them when you were there, what you did and who you talked to, and they know you have a record of it, a lot of the complaints just go away."

Since 1995, functionality built into the database allows it to create automatic service reminders that generate new and repeat business. About 200 to 250 reminders are generated in winter



Bernie Cromi pumps down an aeration chamber where groundwater infiltration had been affecting proper operation of the system. Pumping was required to perform an exterior dye test.

and 300 to 400 in warm weather. The program prints a reminder letter at pre-set intervals, and it is sent to the customers with a return envelope.

When letters are returned, Mike's staff faxes a copy of any addresses not

already in the database to the local health department. The department then furnishes a profile of the system, complete with property locator map. This goes into the file to help crews save time when they visit the site. The company still keeps log books on drain and excavation work, describing each job, its duration, and other vital information.

AN EVOLVING INDUSTRY

Mike's general business philosophy is familiar: "Treat people the way you would like to be treated. Protect your customers' property, and treat a home like it's your own. In our service trucks, we carry towels, cardboard, and other surface protectors. We don't set tools on countertops, and we take our shoes off to protect floors and carpets. You have to have pride in your work."

Mike liberally praises his team members. "I have three folders full of goodwill letters from happy customers," he says. "I post them out near the time card slots. On new ones, I'll write, 'Good job.' That gets them ready to get going again."

On industry specifics, Mike has a lot more to say. "This industry is evolving, and you have to stay on top of it," he says.

"The EPA now recognizes the viability of septic systems, so disposal will

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Mike Humbert

continue to be an issue. Mandatory pumping is being considered by lots of municipalities to prevent system failures and water supply contamination. There is also the threat of utility company takeovers."

He encourages business owners to join professional associations, which give the industry a bigger voice in the way issues are handled, while providing great opportunities for networking.

"The industry is not going to go away," says Mike. "There's always work out there. But it's starting to become more professional, and you have to look professional and handle yourself that way." ■