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Midwest Environmental follows client demand

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Midwest Environmental Services makes a sound business move by following client demand into waterblasting services

By Carol Brzozowski

When Doug Gronauer and his partner Dennis Sterling started Midwest Environmental Services in May 1981, the field was in its infancy and full of possibilities.

“It was a great opportunity,” Doug notes. He and Dennis believed that if they were to make a career in environmental services, they should take direct responsibility for waste. So they bought two waste-handling facilities and later constructed a third.

They expanded into high-pressure industrial cleaning in an effort to provide umbrella service for customers. It was a sound business move — these days, five jobs each day entail waterblasting at pressures from 3,500 to 40,000 psi.

“The overwhelming activity we do is associated with heavy sludges that have been there so long they need to be blasted before they can be pumped out,” says Doug.

Blasting to success

Midwest Environmental is headquartered in Brownstown, Ind., and has facilities in Charlestown, Ind.; Cincinnati, Ohio, and Louisville, Ky. The company works mainly in those states but also in

Illinois, Michigan and Tennessee. In fact, the firm has tackled some jobs in all of the 48 contiguous states during its 24 years in business.

The company’s list of about 2,000 clients includes companies in industries such as steel, chemicals, glass and ink. Services besides waterblasting include hazardous waste handling, wastewater treatment, emergency spill response, site remediation, OSHA and HAZWOPER training, identification and transport, and disposal of laboratory chemicals for hospitals.

Waterblasting is an ongoing need. “The need for cleaning in the auto industry isn’t too different from the need for cleaning in the steel industry,” Doug



Photo and inset: Midwest Environmental technician Marsha Rose pressure-cleans an area with a Landa pressure washer.



says. “You may be using different pressures, but it’s the same mission. There’s a substance that needs to be removed by pressure.”

The material removed by waterblasting is sometimes removed from the site, sometimes disposed of on the site, and sometimes recycled. “Sometimes we take material out that contains a valuable substance, such as a precious metal,” says Doug. “In those cases, the customer will want us to deposit that material into a holding tank or storage area, from which they send it off to a recycler.”

Three types of jobs are the most challenging: Dealing with heights, as in waterblasting towers, working in deep pits, and blasting toxic materials. In the latter area, Midwest’s health and safety and risk management team gets involved. They scope out the job, specify the personal protective equipment the crews must wear, and make sure the people are properly trained and use the right equipment.

Lots of preparation

“If we are given a job like that, there’s probably a day or two of preparation work before we actually do the job,” Doug says. “It’s not something field people would simply go out and do. We make sure everything is covered.”

Weather also presents challenges. Doug notes that waterblasting crews often must work in extreme cold or heat. During summer, the company sometimes alters work schedules to avoid the heat of the day. Instead of starting at 7 a.m., employees may begin at 11 p.m.

PROFILE

MIDWEST ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES, BROWNSTOWN, IND.

OWNERS:	Doug Gronauer and Dennis Sterling
YEARS IN BUSINESS:	24
EMPLOYEES:	80
SPECIALTIES:	Waterblasting, hazardous waste handling, emergency spill response, site remediation, OSHA and HAZWOPER training
SERVICE AREA:	Primarily Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana
WEB SITE:	www.midwestenvironmentalservices.com
AFFILIATIONS:	Certified Hazardous Materials Managers Association





A Supersucker vacuum unit supports a high-pressure cleaning crew.

“The need for cleaning in the auto industry isn’t too different from the need for cleaning in the steel industry. You may be using different pressures, but it’s the same mission. There’s a substance that needs to be removed by pressure.”

Doug Gronauer

and work until 10 a.m.

Top-of-the-line equipment, kept in peak condition, is key to safety and job execution, Doug observes. Midwest Environmental waterblasting equipment includes:

- Three 10,000 psi/45 gpm units from NLB Corp.
- A 10,000 psi/75 gpm unit from Jetstream of Houston.
- A Wheatley 20,000 psi/25 gpm unit.

The company has nearly 40 pressure washers, primarily Hotsy, operating at 3,000 to 6,500 psi. Midwest rents waterblasters with higher pressure ratings for the roughly ten times per year they are needed to cut into tanks.

Trained to blast

Midwest Environmental has 80 employees — all trained in general industry practices and OSHA standards and given 40-hour HAZWOPER training, reviewed up to 10 hours annually.

The firm hires experienced techni-

cians, but also hires people new to waterblasting, and trains them in company procedures. Some of the training comes from NLB. “There’s always a new twist and something to learn,” Doug says. “We feel effective training pays dividends in the workplace.”

The company prefers long-term relationships with employees and so avoids “hired guns” — people with reputations for jumping from one company to another.

Once hired, an employee does not get on the end of a waterblaster for six months to a year. In the interim, the employee goes through all the training programs, then starts with pressure-washing at a lower psi.

Management by example

Doug and his partners are hands-on managers who at least two or three times a week will roll up their sleeves and operate a piece of waterblasting equipment. Yet the company has grown through

Jim Schneider shows Heather Bass how to operate a KHD Deutz trash pump.

delegation of responsibility, says Doug.

“You can’t be everything to everybody,” he says. “A lot of times, your ego is in opposition to you on delegating, but you just have to realize what you do best, and in other areas, you need to hire expertise.”



From left, Terry Hall, Jim Schneider and Amanda Caton go over work schedules in the office of Midwest Environmental Services.

Big, Medium, Small

There are times when Doug Gronauer, co-owner of Midwest Environmental Services, has to swallow his pride and tell customers that as a midsized operation, his company can’t handle a certain job.

That includes steel mill maintenance outages, where the firm would have to immediately mobilize many employees and large amounts of equipment. “We tell them from the get-go we’re not their guys, because I don’t want to make promises to people and they find themselves in an outage and we can’t provide that service,” Doug says. “There is always going to be a need for the little guy, the middle guy and the large guy.”

“Everybody likes to bash the large companies, but when push comes to shove, when major factories have outages and they need that kind and quantity of people and equipment, large companies are the ones who can accommodate them.”

“You can’t be everything to everybody. A lot of times, your ego is in opposition to you on delegating, but you just have to realize what you do best, and in other areas, you need to hire expertise.”

Doug Gronauer

“The bigger you get, you find yourself spending more time doing things not necessarily that you don’t want to do, but that you are not as proficient at as you should be. We know we can serve people through industrial service, but when you get into employee issues, that’s when you have to find the expertise to handle that.”

Midwest Environmental Services is successful because of its service, Doug notes. “It doesn’t matter whether you are selling shoes or industrial services or environmental services — what you are selling is service,” he says. “We emphasize accountability. Dennis or I can be reached 24 hours a day.”

The notion that one can promise never to let a customer down is myopic, Doug says. “Whenever you have human beings involved, that’s not possible,” he says. “We address that situation through accountability. When there’s a problem, we can be reached. We’re not going into denial; we’re going to make it better.”

Retaining customers is a constant challenge. “There’s the notion that there’s plenty of business out there, and

I’m sure that’s a viable notion,” he says. “But if you are a competitor, you want every bit of business, especially on the industrial side.”

Market-driven growth

One reason Midwest has grown is that when it started in business, the market needed treatment, storage and disposal (TSD) facilities. Midwest answered the call. As recently as five years ago, 95 percent of the materials the company accepted were hazardous. These days, that figure has dropped to less than 35 percent.

As that happened, Midwest began handling non-hazardous waste. The company also took on emergency spill response after noting a shortage of service companies in that area. “The marketplace has driven us to the paths we have taken,” says Doug.

Down the road, Doug wants the company to move from the “dispatch mode” to the “onsite” mode — essentially functioning as a member of the customer’s team with a regular presence on the property. More companies are outsourcing environmental work as they look to save money on labor costs such as health insurance and other benefits.

“Today, Company A wants something done, and we have to figure out how we get our personnel and equipment from one of our locations to Company A,” Doug says. “In the future — and we are doing some of this now — we’re bringing our personnel to work daily at our customers’ sites to provide those services.” ■



Jim Schneider adjusts an NLB 10,000 psi waterblaster while Mike Nance (with hand lance) and Mike Wiley, with vacuum tube, remove gravel from a lateral drain.

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