

Dave Drury of Olson's Sewer Services operates the CAT 312 backhoe to backfill around septic tanks.

Always Excellence

An attitude of continuous improvement keeps Olson's Sewer Service on top of the market in Forest Lake, Minn.

By Mary Shafer

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

OWNERS: Jon Olson, president and Lee Weigt, vice president

FOUNDED: 1954

EMPLOYEES: 22-25, changing seasonally

SERVICE AREA: 5-county area northwest of Twin Cities

SPECIALTIES: Excavating; onsite installation and replacement; sewer and water hookups, repair and maintenance

AFFILIATIONS: Minnesota Professional Organization of Wastewater Recycling, Minnesota Onsite Sewage Treatment Contractor Association



“It’s probably the mentality of our company that sets us apart from our peers,” says Jon Olson, co-owner of the business his father started in 1954. “Our attitude isn’t ‘What can we get by with?’ but ‘What can we do better?’”

The company, Olson’s Sewer Service in Forest Lake, Minn., is among the state’s most respected onsite system installation firms, but its offerings don’t stop there. “We don’t do only installation,” says Jon. “We also do the service side, so we can appreciate the full scope of the job. We don’t just throw in a system and leave a problem for someone else. We do it right because we must come back to service it. We also have a lot of experience, because we’re bigger than most of our competitors and have the capacity to do many different things.”

In a nutshell, these characteristics — aggressive self-improvement, full service follow-through and an appreciation of the importance of capacity — spell ongoing success. Jon’s partner is

his sister, Lee Weigt (pronounced “white”), who joined the business in 1994, after ten years in franchising and marketing with an international food service chain.

They have brought the business to high levels of professionalism and profit. Jon’s strengths are product and equipment knowledge and field experience; Lee focuses on administration and marketing. Customer service is integral to the whole business.

Mutual aid

Jon and Lee have come a long way from the days when their parents, Bill and Verna Olson, pumped one septic tank per day. The business moved to a 15-acre facility in 1966, and today the company pumps some 3.5 to 4.5 million gallons per year. The installation business comprises 75 percent residential jobs and the balance commercial. Installation and excavation account for three-quarters of annual billings.

The company’s pole building headquarters contains offices for Jon and

Lee as well as four office staff members and an estimator. It includes a lunchroom and a vehicle maintenance and inspection shop run by a DOT-certified mechanic.

Scott Bjorklund applies sewer joint compound to the maintenance cover opening on an existing septic tank before installing a riser to extend the cover.



Jon and Lee credit most of the past decade's growth to an association with the state certification program for wastewater management professionals at the University of Minnesota. In the 1990s, when it became mandatory for pumping, maintenance and repair professionals to be certified through the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), Olson's signed up for training through the university. The program also offers certification in system design, maintenance and inspection.

All of Olson's staff attended classes, and Jon and Lee developed a relationship with the trainers that includes sharing information about onsite systems and industry issues. As a result, Olson's now performs field tests on pilot systems for the university, in conjunction with the Minnesota Onsite Sewage Treatment Contractor Association, which takes a lead role in testing alternative systems for approval.

Affiliations count

Lee and Jon are huge proponents of joining professional associations for

Dan Westlund and Scott Bjorklund prepare to install risers being lifted onto the top of a septic tank.



In the Pink

Jon Olson's Aunt Dagmar unwittingly established the signature look of Olson's Sewer Service when she suggested a popular 1950s phrase for being healthy and robust as the company slogan.

She suggested painting the trucks pink and lettering "Keep your sewer in the pink" on their sides. And so was born a fleet of vibrant pink trucks. People who need service still call Olson's and tell schedulers, "It's time for me to be in the pink!"

The company encourages repeat pumping service by sending out reminder cards to homeowners who are due for service. To generate repeat installation work, field technicians are trained to recognize problems and troubleshoot small ones on the spot. For bigger issues, they know how to bid repair work and replacements.

professional growth and for lobbying on behalf of the industry. Their membership in the Minnesota Trucking Association (MTA) helps them stay

For formal marketing, Olson's runs multiple Yellow Pages ads and places booths at home shows and Chamber of Commerce business functions. Employees often perform test drives and comparisons of equipment for the local Caterpillar dealer, which recently featured Olson's in the "On Your Own" section of its in-house magazine.

But the biggest, most visible asset is the truck fleet. Vice president Lee Weigt observes, "It's easy to stay top-of-mind when you drive pink trucks."



Erik Waddell delivers mound sand to an installation site in a 2001 Peterbilt dump truck. Lower photo, a GMC Topkick truck with a 1996 Mack vacuum truck in the background. The trucks are painted in the company's signature pink.



"Our focus is on wastewater treatment, not disposal. That's the service and product we're delivering to the customer, so we try to make them aware of the difference and why one way is better than another. And we like to emphasize value."

— Jon Olson

current on state and federal DOT regulations.

"We send more people for training than is mandated by certifying regulations," says Lee. "We even train our office staff in all the things our technicians need to know. The office staff is more book smart than field smart, but when someone calls in with a question or concern, we're more than just an answering service. We have that depth of knowledge that breeds confidence in our abilities."

The company takes part in field technician certification at the university for Designated Registered Professional (DRP) status. This program requires

technicians to install 15 systems to gain initial certification, then to stay current with training and installations to retain that status.

The commitment to training enables Olson's to specialize in residential installations on sites with challenges such as difficult access, extensive woods or landscaping, and high water tables. "We're willing and able to do a lot of work that others don't want to do," says Lee.

She also believes the company's investment in equipment pays off in more jobs. "We have the right capacity," she says. "These types of installations are more expensive because you have

to allow enough time for proper installation, and you have to run the right equipment. Sometimes we even have to rent equipment for specific types of jobs.”

Customer education

Relationship building with customers is another key to success. “We’re very quality oriented,” Lee explains. “People might look and say ‘Olson’s is a little more expensive,’ but then they realize that we give the best value to our customers.”

Customer education is essential. “We encourage homeowners to be on site while we’re working, as long as they don’t get in the way. We know our guys like to talk about what they do, and the customer can’t help but be affected in a positive way.”

Jon adds, “Physical site inspection allows us to interact with customers and answer their questions. That builds their confidence in our knowledge and abilities.” Olson’s also offers literature that explains treatment processes and compares systems.

“Our focus is on wastewater treatment, not disposal,” says Jon. “That’s the service and product we’re delivering to the customer, so we try to make them aware of the difference and why



contractor. We want callers to remember their contact with Olson’s as a positive experience, even if we don’t do a job for them. That generates good word-of-mouth.”

A little technology

Running a business with multiple services takes organization, and Olson’s relies on technology for help. From her corporate experience, Lee brought a respect for computerized systems.

“We use a Microsoft Access database that we hired an outside consult-

“From the record, we can assign the job to the technician who previously serviced that system, because they already know it. The database also lets us pick the right tank size for a new or replacement installation, and it helps us plan our service routes for the maximum efficiency.”

The system also includes sophisticated timekeeping with codes for each type of work. That helps the company account for all labor and understand the true costs of projects in each area of the business.

Investing in people

Jon and Lee are the first to say they owe much of their success to their employees (22 to 25, depending on the season). They freely invest in building a loyal team. “You have to dedicate time to working around people’s strengths and weaknesses,” Lee says. “Your employees are your biggest asset, and you have to make sure you’re offering a place of employment that’s rewarding and considerate of their needs as people.”

Jon and Lee believe that getting good employees will soon become one of the major challenges to installers. They believe young people will be attracted to the business if they see it as a challenging profession with an attractive career path.

“We need to bring up the level of what technicians do and how they’re considered and compensated,” Jon says. “It’s a hard job, a difficult technical job. They should be compensated

Dan Westlund and a tank installer from Wieser Concrete inspect the trench after the tanks have been set.

accordingly.”

Lee agrees. “People coming into the industry have to take time to learn new systems. They can’t just go out and start installing them. You have to hire good people who are trainable. It would be nice to have a pool of trainees with two-year degrees to draw from, but there are no specialized courses to train a labor pool in all these specific skills. Plus training is required to familiarize new technicians with all the different local regulations and codes.”

Get a life

As they build their team and their company, Lee and Jon strive for balance between work and home. “Business owners need to make sure they’re taking care of themselves as well as their businesses,” says Jon. “They need to think long-term, about medical plans for themselves and their employees. Including retirement plans. In fact, planning should be foremost in everything they do to run their businesses, so they can work smart and not so hard.”

Jon and Lee aren’t shy about saying they enjoy what they do. “When I was little, I spent so much time playing with my little Tonka trucks in our sandbox, because it interested me,” says Jon. “Now I’m living a dream. I get to play in a big sandbox with larger toys, and I get paid for it. I love this work.” ■

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Company personnel do a lot of “phone training” with customers. They keep a file of literature from the university program and other information sources and send items to callers when appropriate. They sometimes refer callers to the university onsite program web site (septic.coafes.umn.edu).

Because of its widespread reputation, Olson’s gets many calls for services it doesn’t offer. “If possible, we help callers locate someone who can help them,” Lee says. “We’ll give a referral to someone we know to be a reliable

ant to customize for our specific needs,” she says. It contains all necessary information on each location, and that helps eliminate mistakes and repeat trips to sites.

“Each customer has their own record that contains contact information, location, service history and an indication of whether we have an as-built diagram on file,” says Lee. “We keep those drawings filed in a big binder, but our next step is to upgrade the database so we can scan and store them electronically to print out with each work order. We continually fine-tune the database to better serve our needs.