



CST Utilities operators Scott Ross (left) and Tom Runkle use a Vacall hydroexcavator to locate other utilities as a directional drill works nearby to install new electrical lines in Columbus, Ohio.

SERVICE DIVERSITY

**OHIO UTILITY-SERVICES COMPANY GROWS BY ADDING 'BOLT-ON'
SERVICES THAT KEEP INCREASING CUSTOMERS' SATISFACTION**

STORY: KEN WYSOCKY
PHOTOS: AMY VOIGT



As the owner of CST Utilities, Chuck Lang Jr. knows full well that horizontal directional drilling is fraught with risks. That fact was reaffirmed earlier this year as his company performed a particularly difficult job: an 800-foot-long bore below the Olentangy River in downtown Columbus, Ohio.

The length of the bore, slated to carry fiber optic communication lines as deep as 50 feet below the bottom of the river, already made the project challenging enough for his company, based in Grove City just outside of Columbus. But to add to the job's complexity, the bore also had to pass through a mix of geological conditions including solid rock that then gave way to cobble and then gravel. "It's hard to steer a machine through rock and gravel without changing the head, which you can't do in the middle of the bore," he explains.

The project then got exponentially tougher when the drilling rod broke about three-quarters of the way through the bore. The only option: Pull back out, and bore another hole. "We lost about \$100,000 in equipment, just like that,"

Lang says. "If you count payroll, time lost, and materials, we probably lost closer to \$160,000. We basically ended up doing that job for nothing. But we don't quit on a job. Once we take it on, we don't stop until it's done right.

"To an extent, it's a cost of doing business," he says of the lost revenue. "You have to suck it up and get the job done. If you leave a job like that and someone else comes in and completes it, it kills your reputation."

NOTHING VENTURED, NOTHING GAINED

Lang, 48, is no stranger to taking calculated risks. And that tenacious mentality, coupled with a strong entrepreneurial spirit, goes a long way toward explaining how the owner of a septic tank pumping and drain cleaning company winds up developing a multimillion-dollar-a-

CST Utilities LLC Grove City, Ohio

FOUNDED:
2012

OWNER:
Chuck Lang Jr.

EMPLOYEES:
About 80

CORE SERVICES:
Hydroexcavating, horizontal directional drilling, utility locating

SERVICE AREA:
Ohio

WEBSITE:
www.cstutilitiesllc.com





CST Utilities operator Nick Gilbert uses a Vermeer 20x22 directional drill while boring for new electrical lines for a new apartment building.

year, full-service utility company that serves the entire state of Ohio.

Lang established CST Utilities as an offshoot from his original company Chuck's Septic Tank, Sewer & Drain Cleaning, founded by his father, Chuck Lang Sr., in 1970. Since then, the company has broadened its services to include everything from hydroexcavating, horizontal directional drilling (HDD) and utility locating to pipeline inspections and waterline and sewer-line construction. It also employs 80 people and owns an inventory of excavation and boring equipment worth in excess of \$5 million.

Moreover, Lang — a self-professed serial entrepreneur — also owns nine other businesses, including one that rents steel plates and trench shoring equipment and another that collects and recycles cooking oil from restau-

Chuck Lang, owner, CST Utilities

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Chuck Lang Jr.



rants. "I just can't stop," he says. "If I see any opportunity where I can bolt on a new service [to existing businesses] and capture work, I do it."

What leads Lang to believe he can enter markets where he has no prior experience? "I just don't let anyone tell me I can't do it," he answers. "I just do it. I'm not sure where it comes from, but we do pretty well. Every company I have feeds another business, and that one feeds another."

Lang created CST Utilities after he'd invested roughly \$300,000 in a Vacall - Gradall Industries combination sewer vacuum truck with a hydroexcavat-

technology. Better efficiency translates into increased profit margins as well as higher levels of customer satisfaction, he says.

The company's HDD units offer a good example. Lang used to hire sub-contractors for boring service. But once he ran the numbers, he determined it made more financial sense to buy equipment and provide the service himself. Moreover, the more services CST Utilities could provide, the more attractive the company became to its customers — primarily utilities and general contractors — who preferred the proverbial one-stop shopping.

"I WANT TO KEEP MAKING THE COMPANY A BETTER PLACE TO WORK FOR OUR EMPLOYEES, TOO. IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT ME. I'VE GOT 100 GUYS THAT WORK FOR ME, WHICH BASICALLY MEANS I HAVE SOME 500 PEOPLE THAT DEPEND ON ME (INCLUDING EMPLOYEES' FAMILY MEMBERS). THAT'S WHAT DRIVES ME. THAT'S WHY I PUSH."

Chuck Lang Jr.

ing package. Lang wanted to do more hydroexcavating in response to growing customer demand for the service, which was a logical extension of the services already offered by Chuck's Septic.

Lang wanted to expand his hydroexcavating customer base, but he realized he had a problem: the company's name. "I was doing the hydroexcavating work under the Chuck's Septic name," he explains. "But I couldn't get bigger companies to hire me because they viewed Chuck's Septic as a little company.

"One day, I was doing a hydroexcavating job in Columbus when a lady came out of her house and said, 'We don't have any septic tanks here — what are you doing?'" he recalls. "When I told her we were digging up utility lines, she asked me why a septic company would be doing that. That's when I realized I had to do something. Your company name has to state what you do." The result: Lang formed CST (which stands for Chuck's Septic Tank) Utilities.

EQUIPMENT MATTERS

As the company grew, so did its fleet of equipment. The company currently owns eight HDD machines, seven made by Vermeer and one manufactured by Ditch Witch (a Charles Machine Works company).

The company also owns two Komatsu America Corp trackhoes, four Caterpillar trackhoes, two wheel loaders built by New Holland Construction (a brand owned by CNH Industrial America LLC), a Wacker Neuson telehandler and 14 dump trucks, mostly with Freightliner or Dodge 550 chassis and dump bodies made by Crysteel Mfg. and Reading Truck Group.

In addition, CST Utilities owns seven Vacall All-Excavate combination vacuum/hydroexcavating trucks and just ordered two more. Each one is equipped with a 12-cubic-yard debris tank, a 1,300-gallon water tank, a 5,800 cfm blower made by Roots and water pumps that generate flow of 20 gpm and pressure up to 3,000 psi. CST Utilities also owns a Vactor Manufacturing vacuum truck equipped with a 12-cubic-yard debris tank, a 1,200-gallon water tank, a Hibon Inc. (a division of Ingersoll Rand) blower and a water pump that generates flow of 20 gpm and pressure of 2,500 psi. Furthermore, the company also owns four CUES pipeline inspection cameras.

Lang is a big believer in investing in new equipment that offers productivity-enhancing advanced

ISLAND AD

IT'S A WRAP:

Contractor converts vehicles into rolling billboards

When business opportunities knock, it's hard for Chuck Lang Jr. to not answer the door. A good example is the vinyl-wrap business, Rubberneck Imaging, that he started about two years ago. His wife, Becky Lang, runs the operation.

Why would Lang, the owner of 10 different businesses based in Grove City, Ohio — including Chuck's Septic Tank, Sewer & Drain Cleaning — get into producing vinyl wraps for commercial vehicles? Simple: dissatisfaction with existing vendors.

"I went to two or three places to get a service truck wrapped," Lang recalls. "And when I got the truck back, it didn't look that good and it didn't get it done quickly, either. It took about two weeks. So I told the guy I was going to buy a machine so I could produce the wraps myself. He just laughed."

Lang ended up having the last laugh. He invested approximately \$75,000 in various machines and software needed to produce wraps, including a commercial vinyl printing machine, laminator and vinyl cutter. Then, he and Becky went about learning how to run them. "It took a lot of hours — many long nights," he says. "We messed up but just kept going back. We had to learn how to use the design programs and finally got it down.

"Becky was ready to pull her hair out when we started," he adds. "There are all kinds of tricks to keep a wrap from wrinkling and bubbling. There's basically an art to doing it right." Now, the company can produce a wrap for a service van in three to four days. Larger wraps — say, for a vehicle the size of a combination vacuum truck — might take up to 1 1/2 weeks.

Lang says the venture has been a worthwhile investment, noting that a wrap for a combination vacuum truck could easily cost more than \$20,000 and a service-van wrap costs about \$6,000. "So we've already got our money back," he says.

What happens when all of his companies' vehicles are wrapped? Lang says he's not worried about idle equipment because he buys two to three new vehicles a month. "I don't really see an end to it," he says. In addition, the company is making wraps for a limited number of external customers, too.

Lang believes vinyl wraps are the best form of advertising for contractors, and that's a difficult point to argue after taking a look at the company's vehicles, which feature an eye-catching, red-white-and-blue patriotic theme. "There's nothing better than a billboard going down the road," he says. "You're paying guys to drive down the roads anyway, so why not make the truck a billboard and attract attention? A vinyl wrap turns your company into a name brand overnight. I'd say it increased our sales in all of our businesses by about 30 percent."



"The contractors that were hiring us to do hydroexcavating owned hydroexcavating trucks, so why wouldn't I own boring machines?" Lang says, explaining his reasoning behind getting into directional drilling. "Soon, utility companies started hiring us, and pretty soon, I have eight (HDD) drills."

BUILDING GOOD CREDIT

Investing in HDD machines requires some serious scratch; they range in price from roughly \$140,000 to more than \$1 million, including all the ancillary equipment such as support trucks, low boy trailers and the like. So how could Lang afford to buy so much expensive equipment so quickly? Two words: good credit.

"We did some jobs, started generating some revenue and built really good credit standing with a bank," Lang says. "We made sure the bills got paid. Ever since I was young, I've kept my credit good. If you don't have good credit, it will stop your business — ruin your growth."

Continually upgrading and investing in new equipment also serves as a good recruiting tool, Lang adds. He says job candidates often comment about the company's equipment. "They see our trucks going down the road, and it pulls them in," he notes.

Lang also emphasizes professionalism by requiring employees to wear company uniforms. He spends between \$40,000 and \$50,000 a year on uniforms for employees across all of his businesses and says it's money well-spent because in-the-field employees represent the public face of his various companies.

"They represent our company, and I want them to represent us the way they should," he explains. "I've had companies show up at my door with employees who don't wear uni-

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Chuck Lang Jr.

CST Utilities, based in Grove City, Ohio, offers many services including directional drilling, hydroexcavation, septic pumping, drain cleaning, and more throughout all of Ohio. From left, Jeff Burgstaller, operator, and Steve Besse, vice president of operations.





Chuck Lang, owner of CST Utilities, stands in front of his locator operators and their vehicles in their company yard. Operators include, from left, (Employee names TK)

More Coverage in *Cleaner* and *Pumper*

There's much more to the **CST Utilities** story. The CST family of businesses is also featured in the November issues of *Cleaner* and *Pumper*. The companies' services span the gamut, from directional boring and hydroexcavation to septic pumping and grease recycling, even custom-wrapping their own vehicles and equipment. They don't just do it all, they do it all well. Get the rest of the story in *Cleaner* and *Pumper*.

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forms, and it doesn't look good — you don't even know where they're from. How do you know they're not employees from a subcontractor? I want our customers to know exactly who they're dealing with."

FURTHER GROWTH EXPECTED

As Lang looks ahead, he expects to see continued and measured growth for CST Utilities. Furthermore, he anticipates more of it coming from existing customers than from expanding his customer base. "I'm going to be more focused on offering more of what I call 'bolt-on' services to existing customers and keeping them happy," he says. "I want to grow as my customers grow.

"From that, new customers will eventually come through the internet and word-of-mouth referrals," he adds.

In addition, Lang has no intention of applying the brakes on his entrepreneurial aspirations. What drives that mentality? A strong sense of obligation to his employees, which he says are his companies' most important asset.

"I want to keep making the company a better place to work for our employees, too," he explains. "It's not just about me. I've got 100 guys that work for me, which basically means I have some 500 people that depend on me (including employees' family members). That's what drives me. That's why I push.

"Business is a dog-eat-dog world, and if you don't stay ahead of the curve, there's always a possibility that things could go south," he concludes. "So I keep driving forward to make sure they don't." ▼

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