



NO SLOWING DOWN

SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR BUILDS A FAMILY
PUMPING BUSINESS INTO A FAMILY OF
COMPLEMENTARY COMPANIES

BY KEN WYSOCKY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY VOIGT

If Chuck Lang Jr. believes in only one thing, it's this: You have to spend money to make money.

About 15 years ago, Lang, the owner of Chuck's Septic Tank, Sewer & Drain Cleaning, took a financial leap of faith and invested roughly \$300,000 in a Vacall - Gradall Industries combination sewer vacuum truck equipped with a hydroexcavating package. It was a bold gamble at that juncture in the company's history.

"It was a big investment for us at the time," says Lang, whose company is based in Grove City, Ohio, just outside of Columbus. "But you have to be willing to take calculated risks in order to grow a business. You can't always play it safe. If we hadn't bought that truck, we wouldn't be in the position we're in today."

From humble beginnings in 1970 as just a septic tank pumping outfit started by Lang's father, Chuck Lang Sr., the business has grown into a multimillion-dollar-a-year company. It employs 20 people, owns a large fleet of equipment and vehicles worth millions of dollars, and is one of the bigger drain cleaning players in the region around Columbus.



<< Michael Snider of Chuck's Septic Tank Sewer & Drain Cleaning operates the controls on a Harben trailer jetter while clearing a drain line.

ABOVE Bucky Skaggs (left) and Kevin Lyons launch a CUES lateral inspection camera through a manhole in front of the customer's home.

Moreover, Lang Jr. — a self-admitted serial entrepreneur — has started several related businesses that mesh well with septic tank pumping and drain cleaning. CST Utilities, for instance, does horizontal directional boring, hydro-excavating, and utility construction and locating. In all, he's started 10 different companies, which makes Chuck's Septic Tank, Sewer & Drain Cleaning more attractive to customers who prefer one-stop shopping for services.

"I just can't stop," he says of his entrepreneurial streak. "If I see any opportunity where I can bolt on a new service (to existing businesses) and capture work, I do it." What leads him to believe he can enter markets where he has no experience? "I just don't let anyone tell me I can't do it," he says. "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."

Commercial and industrial cleaning generates about 70 percent of the company's drain cleaning revenue, while residential work produces the balance. The company started out as a primarily residential contractor, but it now works for a wide array of commercial customers, ranging from industrial plants and schools to restaurants and office buildings.

"Commercial work pays better and the jobs are a lot bigger, so we make a larger profit on those jobs," Lang says, explaining the company's slow transition from residential to commercial work. "Problems occur more frequently because drain systems in, say, restaurants get used a lot more than those in homes, and more usage leads to more drain problems."

profile

CHUCK'S SEPTIC TANK, SEWER & DRAIN CLEANING INC.

GROVE CITY, OHIO

OWNER: Chuck Lang Jr.
FOUNDED: 1970
EMPLOYEES: 20
SPECIALTIES: Septic tank pumping
SERVICE AREA: 40-mile radius around Grove City
WEBSITE: www.cstutilities.com

INDUSTRY VETERAN

Lang is no newcomer to the industry, having worked for his father since he was a young boy. "I went out with him ever since I was five years old," he says. "This really is the only job I've ever had. If I wasn't at school, I was with him. I started driving a tank truck when I was 16, working after school and on weekends."

In 2002, Lang became a half-owner of his father's company. He became the sole owner in 2012. His father, now 81, is retired but still comes to work periodically.

The company's slow conversion to a diversified business occurred when the Langs realized the local market for pumping septic tanks had become saturated. Expanding geographically wasn't a realistic option because it would've required lowering prices to unsustainable levels in order to compete against entrenched competitors. "The profit margins in the septic business are so small that it doesn't make sense to go to the next county over," Lang explains. "We realized that in the early 2000s. ... We already were the largest (waste) hauler in Franklin County and couldn't capture any more business."



Owner Chuck Lang (left) speaks with camera technician Kevin Lyons about a lateral assessment job in the control room of the inspection van.

“IF YOU RUN A BUSINESS AND YOU THINK A DOLLAR ISN’T WORTH SAVING, YOU’LL NEVER MAKE IT. EVERY DOLLAR YOU SAVE IS PROFIT – SAVE A DOLLAR HERE AND A DOLLAR THERE, AND IT ALL ADDS UP.”
Chuck Lang Jr.

So the company headed in a different direction: drain cleaning. That, in turn, led to cleaning grease traps and collecting fat and oils for conversion into biodiesel fuels. “When you see opportunity, you just take it,” he says, explaining how he and his father entered new, unknown markets. “There was no teacher there to teach my dad or me. No one is going to teach you how to take away their business. So we learned as we went — just started doing it. Back then, they didn’t have all these classes and trade shows or YouTube videos.”

They made some mistakes, Lang says, but they gained experience.

As the company grew, so did its fleet of equipment. In addition to the Vacall - Gradall Industries sewer truck, the company owns two Harben trailer jettors, equipped with 300-gallon water tanks and pumps that generate pressure of 4,000 psi and 18 gpm; and a jetting truck on a Ford chassis with an FMC Technologies pump (2,500 psi at 65 gpm) and a 1,500-gallon water tank. Kaffenbarger Truck Equipment Co. and Ace Truck Body outfitted many of the company’s service vehicles with shelving and other accessories.

The company also owns two separator trucks, used for collecting fats, oil and grease. Marengo Fabricated Steel built out the trucks on Sterling 9500 chassis with 4,000-gallon steel tanks. The company also owns six vacuum trucks, used for cleaning septic tanks. The pump trucks were built out by Keith Huber Corporation (owned by Hol-Mac Corporation) on Peterbilt 335 chassis. Chuck’s Septic Tank, Sewer & Drain Cleaning also owns Ford, Chevrolet and GMC service vans that carry various sizes of drain cleaning machines made by Spartan Tool as well as RIDGID SeeSnake pipeline-inspection cameras and CUES push cameras.

“My philosophy is buy good equipment from companies with great customer service,” Lang says. “It’s not always just about the equipment. A lot of companies make good equipment these days, so all things being equal, I go with companies that provide the best service.”

IT'S A WRAP: CONVERTING 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 they 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, a laminator and a 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 a week and a half.

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, while 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."



Michael Snider (left) runs the jetter while Dustin Robson feeds hose into a downspout drain.

“THIS IS THE THING: IF YOU DON’T PAY PEOPLE WHAT THEY’RE WORTH – A GOOD WAGE – THEY’RE GOING TO QUIT. THEN YOU HAVE TO TRAIN SOMEONE ELSE, AND THERE ARE COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH THAT.”
 Chuck Lang Jr.

TECHNOLOGY BOOSTS PROFIT

Lang says using GPS technology has improved the company’s profit margins by reducing truck-idling time, among other things. As a result, the company cut its annual fuel expenses by roughly 20 percent. The GPS system, made by Fleetmatics, also monitors things such as how long a vacuum truck’s PTO system runs, how fast technicians are driving, hard braking and so forth. “The system will send managers a text if a truck is idling too long,” he explains.

Company supervisors monitor their GPS screens all the time to make sure employees are working as efficiently as possible. “Look what it would cost you to have 20 guys standing around for even just 15 minutes a day,” he points out. “That comes out to hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.”

The GPS systems can also track engine-idling time, which helps the company knock down its fuel-tax liability. In Ohio, gas used while performing off-road activities can be deducted from the state tax companies pay on gasoline purchases. The GPS system uses sensors that track how much gas is burned during idling time and sends that data to a business-management system, also made by Fleetmatics. “It probably saves us from paying anywhere from \$5,000 to \$8,000 a year to the state in fuel taxes,” Lang says.

The business-management software also keeps track of many different metrics related to profit and performance. For instance, all technicians have an iPad that they use to clock in and out of jobs. That helps management determine how efficiently they operate. Furthermore, instead of having technicians write up an invoice that later is turned in for office workers to process and input into a program, they use the iPads to create an electronic invoice that then gets automatically entered into the management system.



Bucky Skaggs (right) sets up for a sewer main inspection in Columbus, Ohio.

Dustin Robson (left) and Michael Snider make adjustments while jetting a drainline for Fairmoor Elementary School in Columbus, Ohio.



“That takes out the data-entry step in the office,” Lang explains. “We probably save \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year by going paperless. A lot of times, you can’t read the technicians’ writing, which slows things down. But the iPad takes care of that, too.” Technicians can also enter other pertinent information that gets embedded in customers’ files in the management system.

“I believe in collecting a lot of data,” Lang says, explaining why he invested roughly \$35,000 in the business-management system. “The thing about it is that if you take care of dollars, they take care of you. If you run a business and you think a dollar isn’t worth saving, you’ll never make it. Every dollar you save is profit — save a dollar here and a dollar there, and it all adds up. And pretty soon, you can buy another septic truck, for example, or hire another employee.”

GROWTH BRINGS CHALLENGES

Building a business comes with its share of challenges. For Lang, the two biggest issues were finding the capital to keep buying the equipment needed to grow and finding the right people to help maintain that growth. For the former, Lang says establishing good credit and relationships with banks was critical. To help with the latter, he says the company offers above-average wages, a retirement plan and paid vacation time, plus it pays 100 percent of health insurance premiums.

“We also give them bonuses,” Lang adds. “This is the thing: If you don’t pay people what they’re worth — a good wage — they’re going to quit. Then you have to train someone else, and there are costs associated with that. So it’s better to just pay a decent wage to hold good employees. Some you won’t be able to hold, but if you pay a decent wage, employees will be more loyal to you.”

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

He 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 he 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 that don’t wear uniforms, 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.”

MORE GROWTH ANTICIPATED

Looking back, Lang says he’s not surprised that the company grew; that’s what he envisioned would happen. What surprises him is how quickly it occurred. “We’re probably 10 times bigger in terms of revenue than we were seven or eight years ago,” he says. “We’ve really grown a lot in the last five years.”

As he looks ahead, he sees more growth for the company. “I don’t turn

MORE COVERAGE IN PUMPER AND DIG DIFFERENT.....>

There’s much more to the Chuck’s Septic Tank story. The CST family of businesses is also featured in this month’s issues of *Pumper and Dig Different*. 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 *Pumper and Dig Different*.



away work,” he says. “I’m not afraid to buy even more equipment and put more people to work. We’re in full-growth mode. I’m not slowing down. And Columbus and the surrounding cities are growing very quickly, so there’s plenty of work to go around.”

As a long-term goal, Lang says he’s aiming to double the size of the company within the next three to five years. “The only thing that would hold us back is if the economy takes a dive,” he says. “But it won’t be for lack of buying more equipment,” or adding on new businesses, as the case may be. **C**

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