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Sitting Pretty in Pink

A breast cancer awareness initiative helps Umbrella Plumbing advance its visibility and promote its top-quality plumbing and drain-cleaning services

By Ken Wysocky

PROFILE

UMBRELLA PLUMBING & DRAIN CLEANING LLC, STRASBURG, COLO.

OWNERS: Marcus and Kristin Rodriguez
FOUNDED: 2007
EMPLOYEES: 5
SERVICE AREA: Metropolitan Denver area
SPECIALTIES: Residential drain cleaning and plumbing services
WEB SITE: www.umbrellaplumbing.com



When people in the Denver area see a technician from Umbrella Plumbing & Drain Cleaning LLC dressed in the company's signature uniform, they rarely fail to ask: What's up with the pink shirts?

The answer – breast cancer awareness – may seem odd coming from a cleaning contractor. But it makes perfect sense to 28-year-old company owner Marcus Rodriguez, whose outside-the-box marketing boosts his company's brand and aligns with his belief in community service. His altruistic aim is to help make mammograms more affordable.



Umbrella Plumbing owner Marcus Rodriguez prepares the Hot Jet USA jetter for a residential job. (Photography by Jim Johnson)



Service technician Albert Gabriel unloads a Spartan drain-cleaning machine.

“On the back of our shirts, it says, ‘Ask me why I wear pink,’” Rodriguez says. “When people ask, we tell them what it’s all about and leave information behind. Our goal is to encourage customers to get checked. We don’t make any money on this. I’m just a big believer in giving back to the community.”

The emphasis on community service comes from his grandfather, Milo Rodriguez, a police officer and firefighter whose volunteer work ranged from coaching local sports teams to rehabilitating gang members. “My grandfather was a huge inspiration,” Rodriguez says. “When I look back 50 years from now, I want to know I gave back to the community, instead of being someone who takes and takes and takes.”

Rodriguez has trademarked the Plumbers in Pink concept. Any plumber is free to join the ranks by wearing a pink shirt and joining the NOS. As of April, some four-dozen women had scheduled or received mammograms. One was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer and received treatment that otherwise might have been long delayed.

“It’s a very emotional experience when you get a call from someone who’s been diagnosed with breast cancer,” says Rodriguez. “After you get that call, there’s no way you wouldn’t wear a pink shirt.” He wears pink whenever he attends local events, from high school basketball games to parades.

Taking the plunge

Rodriguez started his career by joining the U.S. Air Force right out of high

Effective marketing, rigorous hiring standards, and technologically advanced equipment have helped the company increase its revenue fivefold since startup in late 2007. It also positions the company, based in Strasburg, Colo., to expand slowly into the much larger Denver market nearby.

Rodriguez thought about pink-shirted plumbers for some time. “It’s hard to forget a plumber in a pink shirt,” he says. But the idea came to fruition after he saw cancer survivors in a local fundraising walk sponsored by the Network of Strength (NOS), a nationwide support group for women with breast cancer.

“I realized that the customer demographic we cater to is mostly female, plus it was a perfect tie-in to community service,” he says. From a practical

“If people have a choice between a company that gives back to the community and one that doesn’t, they’ll choose the one that gives back.”

Marcus Rodriguez

standpoint, being community-minded leads to word-of-mouth referrals. Rodriguez observes, “If people have a choice between a company that gives back to the community and one that doesn’t, they’ll choose the one that gives back.”

Money for mammograms

Under the company’s Plumbers in Pink campaign, customers receive \$50 toward a mammogram screening. They either get a \$50 discount on the spot for work performed, or a \$50 credit on their next service call.

In addition, Umbrella (company slogan “We’ve gotcha covered”) donates a percentage of the revenue from VIP service agreements to the NOS and the Ronald McDonald House. The company Web site includes links to those charities.

SUPPORT AND INCENTIVES

For Marcus Rodriguez, hiring is a painstaking, time-consuming process. So once an employee is on board at Umbrella Plumbing & Drain Cleaning LLC, he goes to great length to keep them there.

Small bonuses (“spiffs”) are primary tools for employee retention and satisfaction. But instead of cash, employees earn new tools, from channel locks and torch kits to drills and reciprocating saws. Providing new tools is a win-win formula: technicians love them, and they increase productivity, too.

“I see it as an investment in the technician and the company,” Rodriguez says. “A tool that helps them become more efficient in the field means they might be able to get in that one extra call a day.” Incentive criteria vary. For example, technicians might be rewarded for compiling the highest average ticket for a day, a week or a month.

Rodriguez also pays technicians for coming up with ideas that increase productivity or save the company money. One technician figured out how to reduce the time it took to finish a project. “I looked at the time and materials he saved the company and bumped up his commission from 20 percent of the project’s cost to 25 percent,” Rodriguez says.

Other technicians have found ways to set up the service vans more efficiently, reduce paperwork and improve job estimating. “I want my guys to think like it’s their own company, and the best way to incentivize them is with money,” Rodriguez says.

To make employees feel valued and boost efficiency, Rodriguez meets with them almost daily. That typically means a half-hour meeting in the morning to talk about what happened the day before – how problems were solved or what procedures could be improved. “I love it,” Rodriguez says. “It ensures that we’re not dealing with the same problems over and over and over.”

Rodriguez takes the open-door policy to a whole new level: his office has only three walls. “The one open wall reflects our company’s openness. I want employees to feel like they’re part of a family – to come to me with problems. I’ve dealt with a lot of situations as a sergeant in the Air Force, so I think I can help them deal with things.”



The team at Umbrella Plumbing includes, from left, service technician Phillip Smith, owners Marcus and Kristin Rodriguez, and service technician Albert Gabriel.

school and learning how to be a plumber. After leaving the military, he became operations manager for a drain-cleaning company. “That really opened my eyes to what’s out there,” he says. “In the Air Force, it was a fix-it-and-go mentality. After I left, I learned all about the customer service side of business. I realized fixing things wasn’t the only thing.

“That job was a great experience for me. The owner gave me 20 years of experience in one year. He always took time to explain why we did things, instead of just telling me to do things.”

Rodriguez eventually decided to start his own company. “I was confident I could make it,” he says. “Was I fearful? Yes. But you can use fear to your advantage or use it as a handicap. Fear of failing really motivated me.”

Two books were essential to his success: *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson, and *Freedom from Fear: The Story of One Man’s Discovery of Simple Truths That Lead to Wealth, Joy and Peace of Mind*, by Mark Mattson. Both are required reading for new employees.

The best equipment

Rodriguez realized that buying new equipment with the latest technology would be critical to the success of his company, which focuses on residential drain cleaning and plumbing. “I’m a big believer in investing in assets,” he says. “When I look at a tool bag, I don’t see what it costs – I see what it makes. To stay ahead, you need to have what no one else has. You’ve got to keep up with technology.

“Better tools help you provide better service to customers. Think of it this way: Would a restaurant owner rather be down for three hours or just an hour and a half? Do you want to unclog a drain in five passes or three?” Umbrella’s equipment includes:

- A trailer-mounted Hot Jet USA (Power Line Industries) waterjetter (3,500 psi/12 gpm).
- Three heavy-duty cable machines, three Spartan 100 drain machines for smaller lines, and three Spartan 81 drain machines for bathtubs, toilets and sinks, all from Spartan Tool LLC.
- SeeSnake and SeeSnake microDrain cameras from RIDGID.
- Three custom-built mini-jetters (2,000 psi/3 gpm).

Service technicians travel in two GMC 2500 trucks with 14-foot Morgan box bodies, made by Morgan Corp., and a Ford 550 cab-over service truck.

Rodriguez started out with just a small drain-cleaning machine, small tools and a jackhammer. He spent his last paycheck from his former job on a vinyl wrap for a service van. As he earned money, he gradually bought more tools, starting with used equipment.

**“We’re in the customer satisfaction industry.
We’re not plumbers, we’re customer satisfiers.”**

Marcus Rodriguez

“I pulled a line of credit to buy equipment, but never used it,” he says. “I think the biggest mistake you can make is to start a business with a lot of debt. I literally built the company job by job, investing in new equipment whenever possible.”

Rigorous standards

Good equipment has little value without good employees to operate it, and Rodriguez sets the bar high when he hires. He often interviews 35 to 40 people for a job, considering their demeanor and personality as much as their technical skills.

“I call it hire hard, train easy,” he says. “If you take the time to distinguish the right people from the rest of the group, training doesn’t need to be as extensive because you’ve got someone who will listen and learn. I look for traits in an individual – either they have it or they don’t. You know if their parents raised them right. I know a lot of people who are excellent at what they do, but they still track mud onto a white carpet with their size 12s. That’s not the kind of guy we’re looking for.”

Technicians must be certified plumbers or drain cleaners and pass a background check and a drug test. After they’re hired, they must pass monthly drug tests. “It’s something I offer my customers as a security blanket,” Rodriguez says. “They can rest assured that there are no criminals or drug users entering their homes.”

Core values

Employees must also ascribe to the company’s core values, which Rodriguez borrowed from his military days: excellence in everything they do,



Albert Gabriel uses a RIDGID electronic line locator.

Customers don't get charged if a technician fails to unclog a drain. In fact, if that ever happens, Umbrella will call another drain cleaner to finish the job. (So far, it has never been necessary).

Expansion ahead

Like many small-company owners, Rodriguez wrestles with the issue of growth: How much is too much too fast? How can it be kept manageable? Even though Strasburg lies 40 miles east of downtown Denver, many residents commute there to work. That means word-of-mouth referrals generate more business in the city.

Umbrella operates one truck in and around Strasburg and two from a new shop in Aurora, a Denver suburb. Rodriguez doesn't rule out opening more shops. "We're always challenging ourselves to grow, but I don't want to be a 10-truck shop," he says. "I don't want more than four trucks per shop. By staying small, we can manage response times and keep service personal for our customers."

And keep making people think pink. ■

MORE INFO:

Morgan Corporation

800/666-7426

www.morgancorp.com

Power Line Industries/ Hot Jet USA

800/624-8186

www.hotjetusa.com

RIDGID

800/769-7743

www.ridgid.com

Spartan Tool LLC

800/435-3866

www.spartantool.com

integrity first, and service before self. Those values help differentiate his company.

"If something is wrong, we take a look to see what core value was broken," he says. "It doesn't happen very often, but when it does, it's easy to diagnose. If an employee comes in late because he decided to sleep in, it

"Better tools help you provide better service to customers. Think of it this way: Would a restaurant owner rather be down for three hours or just an hour and a half? Do you want to unclog a drain in five passes or three?"

Marcus Rodriguez

violates the service-before-self value. If a repair is done incorrectly, it violates the excellence-in-all-you-do value. It helps them to understand things more easily."

Rodriguez takes great pains to impress on employees the value of customer satisfaction. "We're in the customer satisfaction industry," he says. "We're not plumbers, we're customer satisfiers. It's important to educate customers and show them that we're knowledgeable about what we do. We don't send out guys with equipment that they don't know how to operate."