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Arkansas Portable Toilet Rentals chose a truck wrap for its latest service vehicle and eventually will wrap all of its vacuum trucks. (Photo courtesy of Arkansas Portable Toilet Rentals)

It's a Wrap!

ARKANSAS PORTABLE TOILET RENTALS OWNER SCOTT THONE TURNS TO SHOWY GRAPHICS AND A BIG ONLINE PRESENCE TO MARKET HIS BUSINESS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

By Ken Wysocky

With four local competitors, Scott Thone knows full well how important name recognition is to his business, Arkansas Portable Toilet Rentals Inc. in North Little Rock, Ark.

Although Thone claims he doesn't know a lot about marketing, he's enjoyed success since founding the company in 2000 by following his instincts and embracing a trial-and-error approach. A good example is his most recent brainchild – a distinctive vinyl wrap on a 2009 Freightliner FL60 (one of the company's seven vacuum trucks, outfitted with a 1,500-gallon waste/500-gallon freshwater Progress aluminum tank and a Masport Inc. pump). The wrap features a watery-looking, bluish-white background dotted with rolls of toilet paper, which ties into the company slogan, "That's how we roll."

Produced and applied by a local design firm, the wrap cost about \$3,000. Thone is certain the eye-catching graphics will pay dividends down the road in terms of boosting brand recognition.

"I can't say it has necessarily turned dollars ... but the truck looks real nice when it's rolling down the road," he says. "So far, no one has called and said, 'I saw that cool truck and I want to rent toilets from you.' But our business is not an impulse-buy kind of thing. It isn't likely that someone will see the truck right when they happen to need a restroom for a big backyard barbecue that weekend. But six months down the road, they may remember us when they need a restroom."

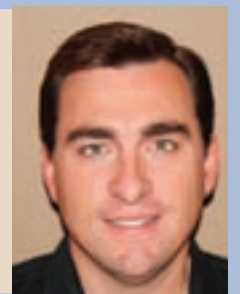
Here are more of Thone's thoughts about the truck wrap and other marketing tools he employs.

Pumper: Why did you opt for a vinyl wrap?

Thone: Vinyl wraps have become pretty popular around here during the last two or three years and I usually remember company names because of them. So since we were buying a new truck, it seemed like a good time to give one a trial run. We were already paying \$85,000 for the truck, so another \$3,000 at that point to turn it into a rolling billboard seemed like a good investment. I wanted to make it a show truck – a prototype – and eventually put wraps on all our trucks. With the number of eyes that will see the truck

"WE'VE GOTTEN AWAY FROM FUNNY, TOILET-HUMOR ... I THINK THAT'S ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HOLDS THE INDUSTRY BACK. IT DEVALUES THE SERVICE IF WE DON'T VALUE IT. WE TRY TO DEAL WITH PEOPLE IN A PROFESSIONAL, BUSINESS-LIKE MANNER."

Scott Thone



over the next five years or so, I think I'll get that \$3,000 back. Plus it's just one more thing that sets us apart from the competition.

Pumper: Who came up with the design?

Thone: My partner, Bubba Wood, and I were kicking around some ideas when we recalled a T-shirt we saw at a festival. It showed a roll of toilet paper and the words, "That's how I roll." We gave the idea to a local graphic-design place and they took it from there.

After we wrapped the truck, we went back to the designer and worked out an agreement where they wrapped the front door of 10 (Satellite Industries Maxim 3000) restrooms with the same design for free in exchange for letting them incorporate their logo into the design. We also told them we'd set those units aside at special events with lots of traffic. Other pumpers could do something similar and get it for free by trading off that bottom quarter of the door.

Pumper: Do you budget a certain percentage of revenue to marketing?

Thone: I've never really put a hard percentage on it. I do it all by feel. I see opportunities or have ideas, and if I think they're justifiable and we can afford them, we do it. It changes from month to month and year to year.

Pumper: How else do you market your company?

Thone: The best thing we've ever done, hands down, is develop a website (www.arkportabletoilets.com). A friend just redesigned ours for about \$900.

Even back when we established our first website four or five years ago, I noticed I was using the Yellow Pages less and less and the Internet more and more. And I figured if I'm doing it, other people are, too, so we needed to have a presence there, especially for out-of-state contractors. We do a lot of construction rentals, and the Internet allows, say, a regional construction contractor from Dallas – who doesn't have a Little Rock phone book or the benefit of seeing our trucks on the road – to learn about our company's services.

Pumper: How do you determine the website's effectiveness?

Thone: We get reports from the website host and also track leads through Yellow Books (an Internet business-listing service that includes a link to businesses' websites). We average 70 to 80 hits a month on our site from unique visitors. The tracking results help us determine where to spend money on sponsored links.

For example, we know we're not going to rent a restroom trailer to someone in California. So we have it set up so we only pay for searches that originate in Arkansas, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Missouri, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. That gives us better value and potential payback.

We're scaling down our Yellow Pages presence and moving more dollars to our website. We probably spend 20 to 30 percent less on the actual hard book now than a couple years ago, and I imagine that will increase a little bit each year going forward.

Pumper: The Internet is one thing. How do you raise your company's profile in the community?

Thone: The restrooms themselves are one of the best advertising vehicles for portable restroom operators – they're like mini-billboards. Everyone should spend money on nice decals and put them on as many sides of the restrooms as you can afford. We put decals on both sides and the front door. You want them big enough that someone can see them while driving by.

We also try to get involved in community events. Sometimes we'll provide reduced pricing to help groups with fund-raising events. If we're personally involved, we donate services. And sometimes we do in-kind trade-outs with radio stations, in which we provide free restrooms for an event they sponsor in exchange for radio advertising, usually geared toward our restroom trailers.

Pumper: What's your image-building strategy?

Thone: The image we project is critical. Our name alone is a marketing strategy – it's basic and easy to remember. We've gotten away from funny, toilet-humor ... I think that's one of the things that holds the industry back. It devalues the service if we don't value it. We try to deal with people in a professional, business-like manner.

Also, there's no question that there's marketing value in clean trucks and clean restrooms. If you do a good job, customers tell other people about you. Word-of-mouth is still the best advertising out there.

We also use social media. We have a Facebook page and we do Twitter, too, to a lesser extent. We have a couple hundred friends on Facebook. When we started, I reached out to everyone I know in the special-event and party-planning business. Other people 'friend' us because they just think it's funny to be friends with a portable restroom operator, I guess. But we'll be friends with anybody.

We post videos on Facebook. For example, last summer, the water pumps malfunctioned in a little town near here. We got a call from the mayor and ended up taking 40 restrooms up there and staging them around town. A television station in Little Rock did a story and interviewed me. When I got home, I recorded the interview off my television with my smart phone and posted the video on our Facebook page within 30 minutes after it aired. Again, I can't quantify its effectiveness. But it contributes to name recognition and goes to the image we're trying to create – a company that's business-minded and progressive, and willing to do things a little differently. ■

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