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INSIDE:
Drain & Lateral Equipment BUYER'S GUIDE



Ready for Anything

Quality staff and equipment provide an edge for Michigan Power Rodding

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Technician Adam Carman monitors reel speed and adjusts pressure on the US Jetting, trailer-mounted unit pulled by a 2004 Ford F-150 4x4 pickup.



READY FOR ANYTHING

Michigan Power Rodding uses trained staff and quality equipment in keeping its pledge: 'We open drains others can't'

By Lynn Tilton

After Indiana native Gregg Greene earned a degree in law enforcement, he and his wife, Michele, moved from California to Michigan.

While waiting for residency so he could apply for police work, a member of his church offered him a job with his plumbing operation. Then, after three years, the same man asked Gregg and Michele to open a branch in Ann Arbor to focus on sewer repairs. Last year, that company, Michigan Power Rodding, grossed more than \$1 million.

In the past decade, the company, which Gregg and his wife now own (again thanks to Gregg's churchmate) has gone from a brand-new business in Washtenaw County to an established

company that carries a high profile.

Its seven trucks each bear the company slogan: "We Open Drains Others Can't," along with the office phone number. Wrapped with a vinyl decal by SignZoo, the trucks are easily seen whether on the road or parked on the street.

In the beginning

Gregg admits that the variety of the work and the positive feelings that come from succeeding with the task at hand have kept his interest in drain repair. Still, growing a successful business, then buying it, wasn't easy. "We worked around the clock the first five years to get Michigan Power Rodding growing, then bought it from Michigan Plumbing in 1999," he says.

One repair job involved a Detroit

P R O F I L E	
MICHIGAN POWER RODDING ANN ARBOR, MICH.	
OWNERS:	Gregg and Michele Greene
SPECIALTIES:	Sewer and drain cleaning, waterjetting, TV inspection, line locating
EMPLOYEES:	13
FLEET:	7 service vans
SERVICE AREA:	Primarily Washtenaw County
WEB SITE:	www.michiganpowerrodding.com
AFFILIATIONS:	Ann Arbor Chamber of Commerce, Washtenaw Area Apartment Association



homeowner who was having a problem because of the city's sewer line. "The city sewer caused a sinkhole over the homeowner's line, which caused a break in his line," says Gregg. "The city had left the hole open for years. They came and filled in the hole, but left the homeowner to deal with his broken line. We ran a power rodding machine to determine that it was broken, and televised and located it to determine that it was right by the sinkhole."

The homeowner's problem ended up getting substantial live coverage from a local TV station, in which Gregg's camera showed viewers just what was wrong with the line.

"The publicity got the city's sewer crew determined to fix the problem," says Gregg. "We told the owner that if the city didn't fix it they should give us another call, and we have not heard from them since."

At first, the couple worked 120 hours a week, with service calls taking the bulk of the time. "We did that until we just couldn't keep up with the work," says Gregg. "We wanted to keep providing better service, and that's when we started adding staff."

Finding the right people

"We spend a long time hiring anybody," Gregg emphasizes. "We do criminal background checks, drug checks, and driver's license checks; and we contact previous employers. We'll have three interviews with each potential staffer and pay particular attention to their personality profile."

"What I like about not doing plumbing is that we can hire anybody — not just people who are licensed. As long as they have good customer service skills and a good attitude, we can do the rest. But to attract those kind of people, we have to do our part in offering benefits such as medical, disability, and retirement."

Customer relations and troubleshooting skills are two qualities employees must have. "That's something you can't teach; you can either troubleshoot or you can't," Gregg says. "After that, we can do the rest. We provide a probation period and train them for several months before they go out on the road alone."

"We're also strict on appearance: no beards and no tattoos. Technicians wear our company uniform, which helps give them authority. Customers get a kick out



Michele and Gregg Greene, owners of Michigan Power Rodding.



Technicians Tom Rieder (left) and Adam Carman clean debris and sludge from a roof vent atop a 2 1/2-story condominium.

of it because it resembles a SWAT team uniform, and the tools they carry are kept in a SWAT bag.”

What about the vehicles?

“Our service manager makes it very clear that the vehicle is part of customer service. Everybody on the road, at the gas station or in the restaurant is a potential customer. Our technicians are driving a company billboard, and know they need to be courteous and polite.

“What I like about not doing plumbing is that we can hire anybody — not just people who are licensed. As long as they have good customer service skills and a good attitude, we can do the rest. But to attract those kind of people, we have to do our part in offering benefits such as medical, disability, and retirement.”

Gregg Greene

“The trucks are kept clean, and any damage is taken care of right away. Vehicle service work is done on schedule. Each of the seven vehicles average 20,000 miles a year. They are driven both day shift and night shift. We try to limit our workers to nine hours a day, but will go to 14 when we can’t avoid it.”

In the past, extended vans were the standard, but now the fleet is going to Unicell fiberglass bodies on Ford trucks.

Adam Carman and service manager Pat Hogan clear a line using the company’s brand new truck jetter from US Jetting.

“We use drum machines when high speed is needed, and sectional rodders or jets when brute force is needed. Our goal is not to just take care of the one problem, but any other problem customers didn’t know they had.”

Gregg Greene

use drum machines when high speed is needed, and sectional rodders or jets when brute force is needed,” says Gregg. “Our goal is not to just take care of the one problem, but any other problem customers didn’t know they had. With those seven machines, we can handle full house jobs instead of a single line.”

Going bigger

It’s not unusual to find such expanded jobs on a weekly basis. Part of the repair visit is to check around the house completely to ensure the company doesn’t get a call just two or three weeks later about another problem. “Billings average a 50 percent increase because of that policy,” says Gregg. “Instead of doing 10 jobs in a day, the technician will do three. Yet, those three calls handled our way will bring in more money than 10 calls handled the traditional way.”

Eventually, Gregg and Michele saw a need to invest in bigger equipment. They added a trailer-mounted waterjetter from US Jetting, and when that got too busy, they added a truck-mounted jetter, also from US Jetting. Displayed at the 2005 Pumper & Cleaner Environmental Expo International in Nashville, the truck jetter carries bold graphics showing an alligator attacking a tree root with its jaws.

“Our trailer jetter was getting too busy,” says Gregg. “We couldn’t keep up with the jetting jobs with only one jet.

Remember the Office Staff

While service technicians are highly visible and critical to the success of a drain cleaning operation, another vital element consists of people the customers never see.

“Dedicated, well trained office staff members are essential to continued growth of this business,” says Gregg Greene of Michigan Power Rodding. “Our customer service representatives (CSRs) book 90 percent of all calls.

“Our CSRs keep things efficient by dispatching each call to the appropriate technician based on skill level and location. We use dispatching software with mapping to facilitate this.” So, whether customers meet them on the phone or invite them into their home, employees are the key variable in the equation that makes Michigan Power Rodding successful.





The Michigan Power Rodding fleet is being restyled with new wrap-around vinyl graphics.

We now use the truck and trailer jettors for small lines, big lines, commercial, residential, municipal work, grease blockages, tree roots, sand and mud. They have endless possibilities. At 4,000 psi, virtually anything is possible, from 1 1/2 to 60-inch lines."

There's the weather

Michigan's weather is often a challenge. "Each year, Michigan has 11 months of bad weather," Gregg jokes. In reality, December through April are the difficult months. "That's when we get more sewer jobs than drain cleaning work," he says. "That's when we have frozen lines in the homes as well as city sewer and storm drains that are frozen."

Because Washtenaw County is flat and wooded, and because most houses have basements, root intrusion into sewer lines is common. "We have a high water table, so we have a lot of backup problems to deal with, residential and commercial," Gregg says.

Commercial work makes up about half the business. Regular customers include the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Washtenaw County Jail, the county courthouse, city buildings in Ann Arbor, and restaurants.

"We train our people to do everything they can without the people in those buildings knowing we are there," says Gregg. "They slip in the back door, using quieter motors on the drain cleaning machines so customers can't hear them."

They also strive to keep any opening as small as possible to inhibit odor migration, especially when caring for restaurants. "We try to keep a work area where it's not going to leak or make noise," says Gregg. "We'll pick a higher spot in the building to work from just to make our presence less obvious."

Commercial customers enroll in preventive maintenance programs to avoid emergencies. When it comes to payment, it's cash or credit card at the time of service. "We try to avoid billing," says Gregg. "We do everything up front. We call ahead of time before we do the work,

and we do it on a flat rate.

What has Gregg really excited is the conversion rate for new residential and commercial customers. "We have a really high conversion rate," he says. "People like the uniformed technicians, and the white trucks with blue and gold lettering really do stick out."

Looking to the future

For years, the company has been run out of an office building in an industrial complex. Now, with three children who may someday want to join the operation, Gregg and Michele are looking to buy property to build a new office.

"It will be three times the present one," Gregg says. "We want to really do it up right. We're going to have an 8,000-square-foot warehouse where all seven trucks can be parked inside. We'll also have a wash station for nightly washing that's needed because of soft dirt or snow. These are moving billboards, and we want them nice. We want to saturate this area, to stay in the area but keep getting larger and better."

Gregg and Michele know that owners have to keep investing in the business to keep it healthy. "You've got to have smart guys, good equipment and good training," he says. "All this helps build reputation. It's not hard to stand out in this industry when you have all those things. As with any other industry, the real need is to meet the customer's expectations. You've got to look professional; be professional."

This strategy has helped this former law enforcement aspirant build a repeat customer base that now accounts for 65 percent of annual sales volume. Customer referrals add another 20 percent. The rest comes from people looking through the Yellow Pages, or quickly jotting down the phone number when they see a vehicle that assures them, "We Open Drains Others Can't." ■

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Gregg Greene



Michigan Power Rodding regards the Unicell fiberglass body, here mounted on a Ford E-350, as its service vehicle of the future.

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