

Up the LEARNING CURVE

YEARS AFTER EMIGRATING FROM SOUTH AFRICA, A TENNESSEE CONTRACTOR FINDS KEYS TO GROWTH IN A FOCUS ON CUSTOMERS AND DEVOTION TO A FRANCHISE

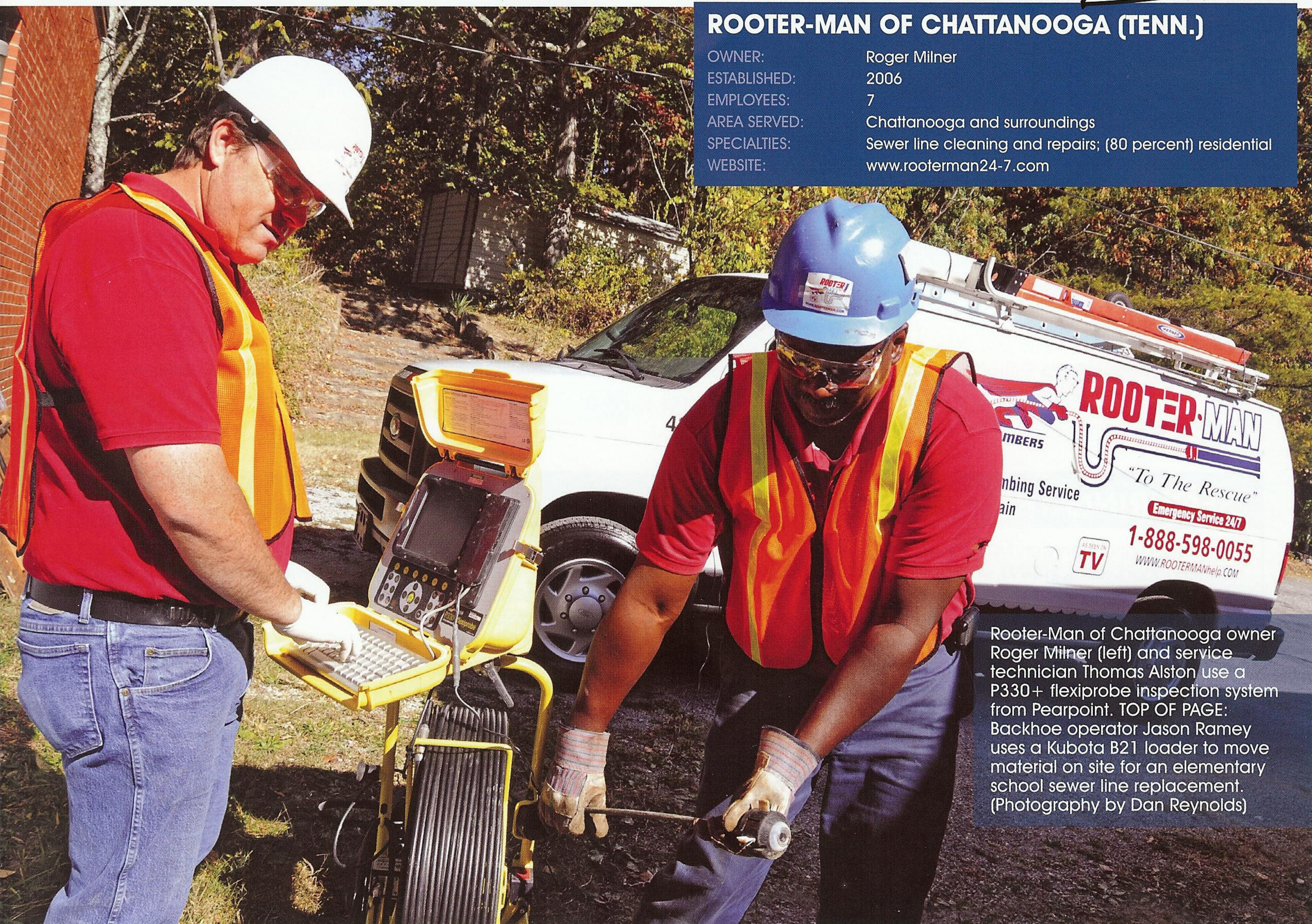
BY PETE LITTERSKI



profile

ROOTER-MAN OF CHATTANOOGA (TENN.)

OWNER:	Roger Milner
ESTABLISHED:	2006
EMPLOYEES:	7
AREA SERVED:	Chattanooga and surroundings
SPECIALTIES:	Sewer line cleaning and repairs; (80 percent) residential
WEBSITE:	www.rooterman24-7.com



Rooter-Man of Chattanooga owner Roger Milner (left) and service technician Thomas Alston use a P330+ flexiprobe inspection system from Pearpoint. TOP OF PAGE: Backhoe operator Jason Ramey uses a Kubota B21 loader to move material on site for an elementary school sewer line replacement. (Photography by Dan Reynolds)

When Roger Milner was laid off from his job as a maintenance man at a church, he decided it was time to launch his own business.

Before taking the job at the church in Chattanooga, Tenn., he had worked for a drain-cleaning business for three years, and as a young man he had completed a pipefitter/sheet metal plumbing apprenticeship in his native South Africa.

So launching a drain-cleaning business seemed like a logical step. Although Milner had plenty of plumbing background, when he stepped out on his own he found he had much to learn about operating a business. At first, he learned from experience, but in April 2009, he signed on with a franchise and learned a great deal more, in less time.

He started the business as America's Plumbing & Sewer, but today operates solely as Rooter-Man (A Corp) of Chattanooga. The company has seven employees, three service vans, and a specialty in residential sewer line cleaning and repairs. Milner credits his growth to the resources of the franchise and to an unwavering focus on customers and their needs.

FIRST LESSON

In fact, one of his first lessons came from a customer. "When I started the company, I went out to a call in jeans and a T-shirt," he recalls. "The customer took one look at me and asked, 'Where's your uniform?' The next morning, the first thing I did was go out and buy a uniform."

That was a lesson on the importance of understanding and meeting customer expectations. Something as simple as showing up in a clean uniform

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can build customer trust, Milner says. Now, when his technicians go on a call, they not only wear uniforms – they wear booties in customers' homes, and they are given disposable coveralls to wear if they need to work in trenches or crawl spaces.



Service technician Randy Ewald (in pit) and Roger Milner use a Harben high-pressure waterjetter to clean a line at a commercial location.

"That way, their uniforms will still be neat and clean when they meet the customer at their next call," Milner says. Another early lesson was that arriving on the job with a well-stocked van rather than a personal pickup makes a difference.

SECURING THE DREAM

Roger and Jennifer Milner emigrated from South Africa to Chattanooga, Tenn., in 1997 when he was offered a job with the Teen Challenge ministry, a Christian drug and alcohol rehab program.

For their first six months in the United States, Roger didn't have a work visa and could not work in the ministry. So he volunteered his services until he could get the visa. When the paperwork came through, he stayed on as a "sidekick" to the maintenance man for the ministry's male and female rehab centers in Chattanooga.

After three years at that job, needing more income, he sought work as a plumber, following his father's path as a pipefitter and sheet metal worker. The job market in Chattanooga threw him a curve ball.

"I put in applications at several places, and it was a drain-

cleaning company that hired me," he says. "I had never cleaned a drain before in my life." But Milner was willing to learn. He spent three years with the company before a Chattanooga church recruited him as a maintenance man.

By then, he and Jennifer had secured permanent residency status and were working toward citizenship. They became naturalized citizens in 2005. The church laid him off after 2 1/2 years, and he went into business for himself.

Milner says it would be hard for a working-class resident of South Africa to imagine starting a business from scratch. He sees the opportunities he had as unique to America: "This was the best move we ever did."



The Rooter-Man of Chattanooga team includes, from left, Loren Potter, service technician; Jason Ramey, backhoe operator; Roger Milner, owner; Daniel Anderson, backhoe operator; Thomas Alston, service technician; and Randy Ewald, service technician.

Investing in his first van allowed him to arrive with the right equipment and most common supplies on hand, saving him time and the customer money. As the business has evolved, Milner has equipped his vans with the tools to get the job done as efficiently as possible. Just as important as bringing the right equipment is making sure customers are satisfied with their service.

DELIVERING VALUE

“One thing I’ve learned is adding value to the job,” Milner says. “Make sure the customer feels they’ve got something for what you’ve done in their home. Sometimes, it’s just a matter of sitting with them and breaking down exactly what you’ve done. If you explain how you’ve inspected a line, what you’ve seen and

In fact, Milner encourages technicians to talk about any calls that might help their co-workers learn a lesson. If one employee finds a good way to service an account that presents a notable challenge, he shares the information so the next person working that account can be better prepared.

LEARNING FROM COLLEAGUES

Milner also uses morning meetings to train his staff, and much of what he teaches consists of lessons from Rooter-Man training sessions. When he acquired his franchise, he spent three days in Tampa, Fla., getting on-the-job training in the company’s ways.

Since then, he has been to several shorter training programs at various fran-

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what you have done to fix the problem, they will feel they got much more value than if you just hand them an invoice that says, ‘Cleared blocked sewer line.’”

Communicating in that manner also lets a technician know if the customer is satisfied or has questions or problems with the job. “Your customer is your bread and butter,” he says. “If they’re not happy, let’s find out right away what the problem is and make it right.”

Customers appreciate his policy of flat-rate pricing and his decision not to charge diagnostic fees when he provides an estimate on a job. Recalls are rare, but when they happen, he discusses them with his team as soon as possible.

“We meet every morning, and if we’ve had a recall, we all talk about it,” Milner says. “Reviewing recalls right away helps avoid problems down the road.” He talks one-on-one with the employee who handled the call, but also discusses it with the whole staff so everyone can learn from it and suggest how to avoid similar problems.

chises in the southeast region. While some training involves business functions like marketing and advertising, much of it focuses on service and sales. When Milner returns home, he trains his employees.

In addition to the formal training, franchisees often share information and advice based on their own experiences. “There are so many things I pick up,” Milner says. “On many training sessions, we go out to other shops and learn from them. You can pick up a lot of ideas you’re never going to get back home, because there the other operators are the competition. With the franchise, these other guys are part of the family, and if you’ve got a question or a problem, you can call on them.”

Since he began meeting other franchisees, Milner has received valuable advice on securing large accounts. For instance, the Rooter-Man operator from Savannah, Ga., has shared his success in securing business with major military bases in his area and has suggested that Milner explore possibilities in his territory.

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A PROFESSIONAL TEAM

Milner has also learned to use incentives and rewards to improve productivity. He gives the technicians production goals and they can earn incentives for meeting them. They are also trained to offer customers Rooter-Man’s Liquid Rooter for drain cleaning.

The technicians are expected to keep their uniforms clean and neat and their vans well organized, stocked, and washed at least once a week. Milner tries to enforce high standards, and the crew embraces them: “They love working here. They feel more professional.”

In addition to the morning meetings, Milner often takes individual technicians out to lunch to help maintain strong two-way communication.

While residential work remains his stock in trade, Milner has landed one major government project that should provide steady business for up to seven years. Facing a mandate from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation to correct inflow and infiltration, the Hamilton County Water & Wastewater Treatment Authority has contracted with two dozen local companies on a Private Service Lateral Program.

Under the contract, Rooter-Man of Chattanooga sends crews to homes in designated areas. They first install cleanouts at the house and street ends of the laterals. Then they pressure-test the lines and inspect them for leaks. Because many of the homes have clay laterals, much of the testing results in replacements.

His company is given a deadline to complete each list of homes, and as long as his crews can keep up with the authority’s pace and performance standards, the project provides a steady source of revenue.

THE NEXT LEVEL

Between the move to the franchise and the contract with the WWTA, Milner’s business has taken the step forward he envisioned several years ago. He hired one plumber during his first year but had not grown after that.

However, when he bought the Rooter-Man franchise in 2009, he added a second plumber so he could spend more time in the shop managing the business. This year, with business increasing, he added a third van and a third plumber and then, with the demands of the laterals contract, he hired two more crewmembers to operate his Kubota B21 backhoe.

Plumbers Loren Potter and Randy Ewald were joined by Thomas Alston earlier this year. Backhoe operators Daniel Anderson and Jason Ramey are the newest additions.

As of September, drain-cleaning calls were up 40 percent over 2009, and the business end of the operation had become so demanding that Milner’s wife Jennifer quit her job as a loan officer and came to work full-time as business manager.

Milner’s fleet has expanded to two panel vans, two box vans, and a Ford F350 pickup to haul the backhoe. Each of the three service vans travels with an O’Brien Manufacturing (a division of Hi-Vac Corporation) 2513 cart jetter and three drain machines from General Pipe Cleaners with 1/4-, 3/8- and 5/8-inch cables. The equipment list also includes a RIDGID SeeSnake camera, a Pearpoint P330+ flexiprobe camera system, a Flexicam video inspection system from SRECO-FLEXIBLE, and two cameras from South Coast Equipment.

For larger jobs, the company has a Harben Eliminator trailer jetter. Other diagnostic tools include two Prototek 2100 Series Line Finder locators, a RIDGID NaviTrack Scout locator, a Radiodetection CAT3 and Genny pipe locating system, and a Sewerin Stethopon 4 water leak detector.



Service technician Loren Potter unloads a Speedroooter drain-cleaning machine from General Pipe Cleaners to take on a residential job.

INTO SEPTIC SERVICE?

Although his business has been growing rapidly, Milner already has his eye on the future. “I want to focus on where my next revenue is going to come from, and that seems to be septic system service,” he says.

With many people building homes outside the city, Rooter-Man of Chattanooga has a growing number of customers on septic systems, and Milner believes that segment of the market will continue to grow. For now, he refers customers who need tanks emptied or field lines serviced to businesses that specialize in septic systems.

“My goal is to add a pump truck, and within the next two years I hope to be fully into installing field lines,” Milner says.

Although there has not been much call for pipe bursting or lining in his market, Milner believes that as PVC lines continue to replace clay lines, the demand will grow. For now, when he goes to trade shows or reviews trade publications, he is constantly studying options and considering which direction to explore as he continues to take his business to “the next level.”

more info

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