

NOTHING BUT QUALITY

In personnel, equipment and customer service, everything is first rate at A Rooter Man Plumbing in Pittsburgh

By Marian Bond

A Rooter Man Plumbing co-owners Jim English (left) and Wayne George, with Jim's son, Logan.



PROFILE

A ROOTER MAN PLUMBING PITTSBURGH, PA.

OWNERS:	Jim English and Wayne George
EMPLOYEES:	15 (including owners)
ANNUAL SALES:	\$1.2 million
SERVICE AREA:	Five counties
SERVICES:	Plumbing, video inspection, hydrojetting, pipe replacement
FLEET:	9 service vans



It took just three years for partners Jim English and Wayne George to build their start-up plumbing and drain operation into a \$1.2 million-a-year business.

Launching A Rooter Man Plumbing in Pittsburgh, Pa., with just two service vans, they grossed \$600,000 in the first year. First-month revenue was just \$5,200, but in the second month it reached \$28,000, and in the third month \$55,000. By then, Jim and Wayne had added one employee, and they knew they had a winner. In the second year, sales added up to \$1 million.

Starting with the initial plans mapped out around Jim's home office, the two set out to achieve growth and profit

want to just get bodies in a truck to do the job and make money. We wanted to have the right people on the job."

The right technician

Jim and Wayne wanted a crew small enough to keep track of, and to ensure a quality job for every customer. Today, at the three-year mark, they have 13 employees, including eight service technicians, three on a digging crew, and two office workers. Eighty-five percent of the business is residential, and the balance is commercial. The company, a Rooter-Man franchise, performs exclusively service work — no new construction.

The fleet consists of seven Chevrolet vans (either 3/4 or one ton), two Chevrolet 12-foot box vans, and a Grumman truck with dual wheels, hydraulic pump and hydraulic jack hammer. They use seven Gen-Eye cameras from General Pipe Cleaners for video inspection and two Hydrojetters from O'Brien Manufacturing for heavy pipe cleaning.



This new 3/4-ton Chevrolet service van is featured in A Rooter Man advertising.

through quality service and quality customer relations. In fact, quality in every aspect of the business was a top priority — they saw it as the key to customer loyalty and repeat business.

"We wanted to build the business slowly, and correctly, and not become so large that we would lose track of the customer, or be hiring people who did not meet our criteria," says Jim. "We didn't

Wayne handles all excavation projects, operating a backhoe, skid-steer loader and dump truck, equipment he brought into the business. Jim came to the Rooter-Man operation with experience working for a similar business in the area. Initially he drew his team from among former co-workers. "These were people I knew," he says. "I knew their style of work and the quality of their professionalism."

Today, when they bring in a prospective employee, each partner conducts an interview. They look for people with confidence and a professional appearance, preferably clean-shaven. The company supplies uniforms, and technicians carry a clean uniform in the service van in case one gets soiled.

Newly hired technicians work on a 90-day trial period so that Jim and Wayne can assess their job performance and sales ability. "We are quality conscious and sales driven," says Jim.

New hires ride with an experienced employee for a time, until they demonstrate that they can perform to expectations. The firm does not need to advertise for employees, as qualified people often call looking for work.

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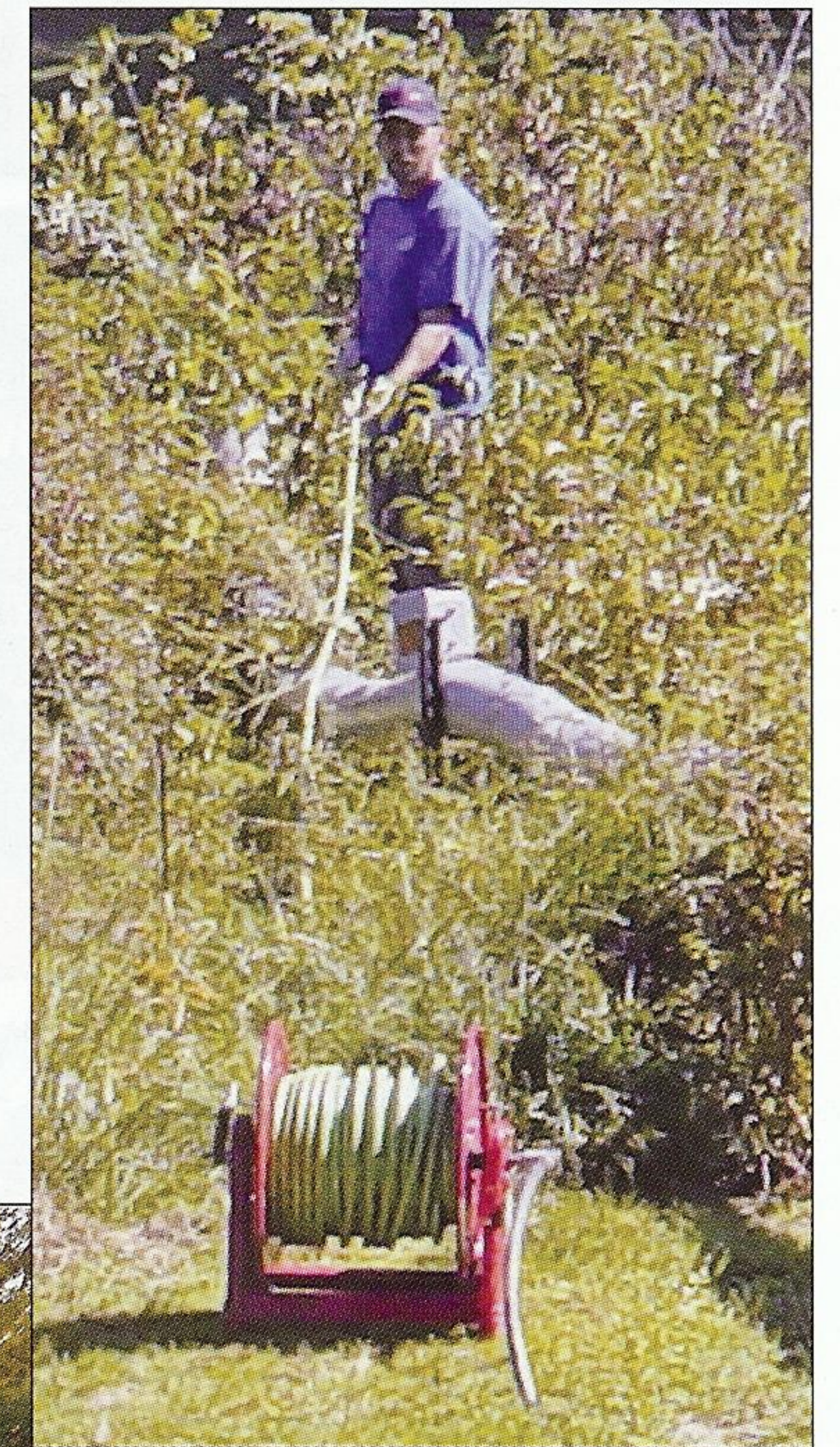
Jim English

When they do, Jim takes down their names for future reference. "I think that people who are looking for work are motivated people and are the type we would look for," Jim says. "I try to get family-oriented people — someone with a family to support."

Imparting the vision

From the start, Jim and Wayne give employees a clear understanding of the company's goals, including their intention to stay relatively small. Their goal is to build a solid customer base, and that means courtesy toward every customer is the priority.

So is customer satisfaction. If a customer has a complaint, the company



Toward the Future

To accommodate the fast-growing A Rooter Man Plumbing, co-owner Wayne George recently purchased a 40-acre parcel of land. The plan for the near future is to construct an office facility there with a heated garage and several service bays. The company also plans to add septic tank pumping to round out its service offerings.

As for buying more equipment, Wayne and partner Jim English prefer to purchase new, or lease, so that their vehicles and machines are always up to date and reliable.

"We can't have our equipment breaking down, because then we lose our quality of service, and we lose money," says Jim. "We consider how busy we are when talking about a new purchase. We seem to know when the time is right."

Above, a technician excavates during replacement of a natural gas line at a residence. Upper right, Jerry Nagel hydrojets from clean-outs at a country club. At right, a technician uses a waterjetter from O'Brien Manufacturing to back-jet a lateral at a Mexican restaurant.

"We are quality conscious and sales driven."

Jim English

with the best sales for the month. In addition to the monthly bonus program, the partners have started a yearly contest in which the top technician receives a vacation package.

The technicians' sense of ownership extends to the service vehicles, which they are expected to keep clean and in good condition. Each service van carries an inventory of about \$1,000 in parts and supplies. The vehicles are inspected regularly. "First impressions are everything to us," says Jim.

A Rooter Man tries to convey that positive impression across a service area that includes Pittsburgh and five surrounding counties. Service technicians communicate using cell phones, but Jim and Wayne are looking into a more sophisticated system.

Step by step

When a customer calls for service, a real person answers the phone, anytime, day or night. "We do not use an answering service," says Jim. "Our customers can't believe when they call at off-hours that they are talking to someone in the company.

"One of our office assistants answers the phone at night, or if not her, it will be me. One of our technicians will be on call and will go out for emergencies. We advertise as a 24-hour emergency service."

Before going on the call, the technician determines how critical the problem is and, if it is not a true emergency, assures



the worried caller that someone will be there the next business day. In a true emergency, such as a pipe leak or a dangerously backed up line, the technician goes out immediately. There is an extra charge for emergencies, and technicians receive that money as a bonus.

Service technicians take their vans home at night and are dispatched each morning to their routes. The dispatcher calls each technician with the first job of the day. After each assignment, the technicians check in and receive their next job.

Upon arrival at the customer's door, technicians hand the customer a business card and introduce themselves. Before entering the home, they put booties over their work boots. They diagnose the problem, discuss it with the customer, and give a quote from a price book, which is available for customers to see.

While on the job, technicians offer to do a free video and a visual inspection for other problems that may exist. Depending on what they find, they may recommend other work and suggest that

the customer have it done on the spot to save the expense of another call. These additional sales are considered in the bonus program. Jim estimates that additional work is performed on about 30 percent of calls.

Ensuring satisfaction

Upon finishing all work, the technician leaves a refrigerator magnet with the company name and phone number. An office worker follows up with a telephone call to be sure the customer was fully satisfied. Any problems a customer may raise are referred to Jim for his review and action. Each customer receives a thank-you card that includes a \$10 coupon for the next service call. Coupons are also included in the company's telephone directory ads.

As the company grows, Jim and Wayne see a need for more supervisory personnel. They prefer to hire from within and look to seniority as one of the deciding factors. It's a practice designed to ensure that A Rooter Man Plumbing builds a reputation for quality that will endure for years to come. ■

does what is necessary to make the person happy, even if that means a price break or a free service. Jim likes to remind technicians that they are actually working for themselves, using the company name and equipment — and that they can build their own customer base.

Technicians are well rewarded for good service and customer sales. Each Monday morning at a team meeting, technicians turn in their paperwork, and a review of the past week is conducted. The meetings give technicians a chance to raise issues of concern and share advice and best practices.

On the first Monday of each month, the meeting is held at a local restaurant and includes breakfast. At this meeting, a \$200 bonus goes to the technician