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A Niche Business

The owners of Proline Vector Services believe in doing a few things well and offering those services to a broad range of customers

By Carol Brzozowski

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From one truck to 11 in five years. That's how fast the fleet of Proline Vector Services has grown. The company's ability to build a strong fleet and post solid revenues despite two years of recession is a testament to the two men who started it in June 1998.



Proline, in Pompano Beach, Fla., has grown because owners Todd Blum and Paul Possanza homed in on a set of needs and designed a company to meet them. For Todd, who runs day-to-day operations, the secret lies in buying the best equipment and finding a niche that returns the investment.

At the time Proline started in business, one large company in the area handled most of the vacuum work. Proline entered the market anyway, on the notion that there was enough work to go around in a region that was still developing.

"I don't think when we started that we really saw it growing as fast as it did," says Todd. But contacts he and his partner had through previous work in the industry helped the company take off.

Second largest

Now Proline is probably the second largest company of its kind in Florida in terms of fleet size, Todd says. Although there is competition, it is "friendly." If Proline can't handle a job, Todd refers a client to another company. And those companies reciprocate. Proline Vector Services does \$2 million in annual sales. Services include vacuum cleaning, grouting, and televising.

The company specializes in cleaning big pipes. "We pride ourselves in the new challenge — something that someone might say they can't do or it's too big for them," Todd says.

Proline buys only new equipment. "A lot of other companies might be out there for an hour and then the truck breaks down," says Todd. "I try not to even send a truck to a job if I know there's a problem. We'll switch it to another truck. I had a call where a competitor was on a job and they weren't finished with it and the customer said, 'They're not going to be back until next week and that can't happen; we need it done now.' So I was able to pull two trucks from one of the jobs I was working on. We finished the job in one day and he was thrilled. That's a new customer."



Buy new, find a niche

In five years, Proline has developed a client list that includes developers, municipalities, and other contractors.

Todd concentrates on the developer market to get large, long-term and financially stable jobs. Proline services sewer and stormwater pipes for new development. "We try to get in with the owners, going in after development to do the final inspections they need from the counties," he says. "It's a lot of the bigger, long-term work instead of the daily, hourly work."

Developers like Proline's full range of services. "They'll hand me a set of plans and tell me they need it inspected by a certain date, no matter what it takes," Todd says. "They say, 'You take care of it for me.'"

Municipalities face tough requirements to tighten their systems against inflow and infiltration. That means more frequent inspections of entire sewer systems. It has paid off for Proline to keep abreast of that. Proline does a complete package of services.

Proline also subcontracts with other companies, notably Insituform Technologies, Inc., a major sewer pipe rehabilitation company. "They keep our TV trucks busy every day," says Todd. "We'll go in and take a look at the pipe and make sure everything's OK. They'll come in and line the pipe, and then we go in afterwards to show a kind of before-and-after."

Proline's sister company, Sonic Engineering, deals in underground pipe construction and site development. Paul operates that company. The two companies work hand-in-hand, Sonic Engineering doing site development, Proline coming in afterward to service the pipes. "They have three pipe crews that produce work for us," Todd notes.

Finding a comfort level

Some company owners ponder whether to establish a niche or diversify. Todd prefers to offer niche services to a broad range of customers. "We don't want to get into something we're not real comfortable with," he says. "We are open to trying new things, but, for instance, I don't want to get into the lining business. I don't think I could compete with people who are already doing it; they do it best. I'll stay at what I do best."

The approach works. Proline deals mostly with repeat customers. "We've met some contractors we've been working with from day one, and they're doing a lot of work in Orlando and then in Tampa — they want to take us there with them," Todd says.



He's monitoring job opportunities to determine whether opening a truck yard or small office in another area would be beneficial.

Proline Vactor Services has 22 employees. There has been little turnover among drivers, but retaining laborers is a challenge. "We've found better luck hiring somebody who can make it to work every day and has a good personality," Todd says. "We like to teach them ourselves how we do things" Two of Proline's employees are certified divers, including Todd's brother Douglas, who is also a TV operator.

Given Todd's experience in the industry, he finds few surprises on job sites, but that doesn't mean there are no challenges. In Boca Raton, at a development that surrounds a business community and golf course, Proline was charged with pumping pipes, cleaning and televising them, inspecting them for leaking joints, and fixing the leaks. The company will assess 1,700 feet of 54-inch pipe and 1,400 feet of 48-inch pipe.

Proline is also cleaning and televising all the drainage pipe in a parking garage that is being rehabilitated. "We have to do all of the little pipes all the way down to the final floor," Todd says. "That will be a lot of mini-cam work and a new challenge for us."

The company also has numerous jobs with the Florida Department of Transportation, cleaning and televising miles of pipe. A contract with Tri-Rail, a three-county commuter rail system, meant cleaning all the drainage pipes under the train tracks.



A notable fleet

In building its fleet, Proline started in 1998 with a Vac-Con combination unit carrying a 10 cubic-yard tank and 80 gpm pump. Since then, Todd has added the following (all units operating between 60 and 80 gpm):

- 1999 Vactor positive displacement (PD) unit (1,000-gallon water tank, 10-cubic-yard debris body).
- 1999 Vac-Con PD unit (1,000-gallons/10-cubic-yards).
- 2000 Vac-Con PD unit (1,000-gallons/10-cubic-yards).
- 2001 Vac-Con tandem PD unit (1,500 gallons/16 cubic yards).
- 2003 Vac-Con PD unit (1,600 gallons/16 cubic yards).

In combination trucks, Todd favors positive displacement units because they enable working underwater. "The water table affects everything down here," he says. "Every job is basically under water. It's why we buy the kind of trucks that we do for our cleaning."

Todd wants Proline's trucks to have large water capacity. "If you don't have the room to put all that water, then you're dumping all the time," Todd points out. "Our 2003 Vac-Con has a 16-cubic-yard tank and is able to hold 1,600 gallons of water. We adapted it so we can fill the debris tank as well as the water tank up with water. So we can now hold a little more than 4,000 gallons of water."

Proline also owns sewer jetting equipment and three pipe inspection vehicles: a van with an Aries televising system; an Aries TV inspection Hi-Cube truck-mounted system with grouting capability, and an additional truck onto which Todd built an Aries TV and grouting system. Todd wants trucks that accommodate equipment for televising pipes from six to 36 inches. He recently purchased a large-line tractor for televising pipes up to 102 inches.



Making a difference

In Todd's office (in which he spends little time) a sign on the wall reads:

"It's the little things that make a big difference."

"I tell my guys they need to be politicians," Todd says. "Customers are going to tell you things you don't want to hear, but you need to be as polite as you can, because one guy saying you did a bad job is going to hurt you down the road. We try to please them the best we can." •

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