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Small is good for thriving
Massachusetts company

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One-Truck Pony

Selective marketing and controlled growth prove small can be beautiful — and profitable — for The Pump Grump

By Mary Shafer

Few pumpers might imagine that bragging rights come with a single-truck operation, but Wendy and Buddy Juergens of Foxboro, Mass., say they're doing just fine, thank you very much. Their two-person family business, The Pump Grump, has parlayed a narrow but deep market and a fanciful name into a solid, thriving business.

While larger concerns jockey for position through multi-service

offerings and impressive fleets of vehicles and equipment, The Pump Grump satisfies itself by doing one thing — pumping — really well, with a crew of one — Buddy Juergens. A single administrator/dispatcher — his wife, Wendy — backs him up at the small office in their only location.

How do they stay profitable in a single-service channel? Don't they have growth ambitions? Can such a compact business really have a future? The Juergens think so, and their track record supports the straightforward business model.

Profile

The Pump Grump Foxboro, Mass.

MASSACHUSETTS



STARTING OUT SMALL ...

Five years ago, Buddy Juergens found himself unhappy at the larger pumping firm where he was employed. Wendy Juergens suggested they consider opening their own pumping business. Not coming from a business background, her husband wasn't sure they could make it work.

Formerly a corporate executive, Wendy Juergens made a list of all the things

Owners:	Edward "Buddy" and Wendy Juergens
Founded:	2001
Employees:	2
Service Area:	Foxboro, Wrentham, Mansfield, Norton, Sharon, Taunton and Walpole in Norfolk and Bristol counties, Southeast Mass.
Fleet:	2002 Sterling Acterra with a 3,600-gallon Heil Tank purchased from Bay State Truck & Trailer
Specialties:	Septic tank pumping, cleaning and small repairs
Annual Billing:	Less than \$300,000
Affiliations:	Tri-Town Chamber of Commerce, Business Network International (BNI)
Web site:	www.pumpgrump.com

AS FOR BUDDY JUERGENS, HE TAKES THE WHOLE THING WITH AN EASY SMILE. WHEN HE PULLS UP TO TALK WITH A NEW CUSTOMER FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE PERSON WILL OFTEN REMARK, "YOU'RE NOT GRUMPY!" "NO, BUT MY WIFE IS," HE QUIPS.

Buddy Juergens shows up at a jobsite with his lone truck, a 2002 Sterling Acterra. Many customers call the company after seeing the catchy name on the door of the truck. (Photos courtesy of The Pump Grump)





Wendy Juergens explains how a septic system works for a home-schooling class. The Pump Grump believes homeowner education is part of its customer service mission.

they'd need to do to start a new company, and Buddy Juergens mulled it over for a few days. He felt overwhelmed by the business side, but Wendy said she'd take care of all that while he performed the actual services. Her background in sales, marketing and administration, and as an

entrepreneur in her own business, had prepared her well for the challenge, and soon her husband agreed to become her business partner.

They created a business plan, with an eye to the future right from the start. They had to pick a name for the new venture. With succession plan-

"PEOPLE HEAR ABOUT PEOPLE WHO DO EXCELLENT SERVICE. ... WE DO A GOOD JOB PUMPING, AND GO OUT OF OUR WAY TO TEACH PEOPLE WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW. I TELL THEM, IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS AT ALL, WHETHER YOU USE US OR NOT, CALL."

Wendy Juergens

ning in mind, they didn't want to use their family name, which could become a liability when they were ready to sell the business.

It had to be a marketable name. They threw possibilities back and forth, and the conversation went off on a tangent about a grumpy guy they both knew. Buddy became quiet for a moment, then offered, "How about 'Pump Grump?'"

Wendy Juergens knew her husband was an unflappably happy guy, and considered the irony. "I thought it would work as a tongue-in-cheek kind of thing," she says. So they adopted The Pump Grump as their moniker and lettered their truck with it. "Now, he's known laughingly as The Grump," she says. "It works really well."

As for Buddy Juergens, he takes the whole thing with an easy smile. When he pulls up to talk with a new customer for the first time, the person will often remark, "You're not grumpy!"

"No, but my wife is," he quips.

... AND STAYING THAT WAY

Wendy Juergens began marketing efforts by going out and talking with people.

"We let everyone know what we were doing." The couple spoke to people through networking events sponsored by the Tri-Town Chamber of Commerce "and everything else I could attend," she says. She also networked through her personal database of more than 2,000 local names, which she'd built up through her association with Business Networking International.

Since then, their customer base seems to have taken on a life of its own, growing to a current level of 1,600. "People hear about people who do excellent service," Wendy Juergens says. "It's got a lot to do with Buddy's personality. Plus, we do a good job pumping, and go out of our way to teach people what they need to know. "I tell them: 'If you have any questions at all, whether you use us or not, call.'"

Now in their fifth year, The Pump Grump currently averages five new customers a week in the busy season (about six months a year). In 2005, Buddy trucked 1.2 million gallons of waste to the treatment plant with the company's sole truck, a 2002 Sterling Acterra with a 3,600-gallon tank from Bay State Truck & Trailer in Rehoboth, Mass.

When new residential customers call, Wendy Juergens talks with them "to try to understand how they feel about their septic systems, whether they really want to take care of it or not.

"I put them into categories: ones who pump every year, every two years, and every 3-5 years. Using that basis, I'm going to do some 'cleaning out.' We can now start choosing who we want to work with. If people don't take care of their systems, they tend to be the ones who call you in the middle of the night. We don't want that. We hate going out in the middle of the night and having to charge emergency rates for things that shouldn't happen in the first place."

Asked how they'll manage to stay small yet remain profitable, Wendy Juergens is optimistic. "There shouldn't be an issue, because as time goes on and we get more efficient, we become more profitable. We need to focus on scheduling and keeping peo-



Above, Buddy Juergens closes the tank valve after pumping a septic tank. Right, Juergens explains septic cleaning charges to a customer. Before he leaves a jobsite, Juergens makes sure customers understand all work performed and maintenance recommendations.



"I GO ALONG ONCE EVERY OTHER WEEK, JUST SO PEOPLE CAN MEET ME AND PUT A FACE WITH A VOICE. I ALSO LEARN SOMETHING EVERY TIME. MY FOCUS IS ALWAYS TEACHING PEOPLE WHATEVER I CAN ABOUT WHAT'S IN THE GROUND."

Wendy Juergens



Above, Buddy Juergens performs small repairs, such as this outlet T replacement, but stays away from major system repairs. Right, Juergens carefully removes the sod over a septic tank before pumping. He carefully replaces sod after a job to disturb the site as little as possible.



ple happy. We still have a lot of room for growth, as long as people are flexible.

"November is our busiest month. People are getting ready for holiday traffic, etc. I've been starting to ask people who have systems that are in really good shape whether they'd consider moving their winter pumping dates to the spring, so we can even out the busy/slow cycles."

Pump Grump is also striving to build commercial business for winter. They're especially going after schools, which they try to schedule for pumping over winter recess.

EFFICIENCY EXPERTS

Wendy Juergens is only booking out a week and a half right now, scheduling two to a maximum of four service calls per day. She leaves time open in Buddy Juergens' day, which often fills up with commercial jobs. Pump Grump has about 30 commercial accounts now, which they consider a good number.

In another effort to maintain profit ratios, they work with a CPA who's

been very helpful with planning for the future. "We don't do any unnecessary spending," Wendy Juergens says. "This is also going to be our retirement.

"I'm a big planner. We do a yearly budget, and we establish goals." They analyze what they spent money on in the last year. Sometimes they do so quarterly, examining phone bills, vendor expenses and insurance.

Smart analysis means also knowing when they should spend money, and for Wendy Juergens, that's in the office. They use the QuickBooks software for accounting and pay a bookkeeper. "Numbers aren't my thing," she admits. "I can analyze, but entry isn't my thing. My time's better spent in marketing. I'm a great delegator." She keeps customer records in ACT!, a customer relationship management database. They back up their files weekly.

Inspection Regulation is a Mixed Bag for The Pump Grump

In the mid-1990s, Massachusetts enacted Title 5 legislation to address environmental hazards posed by failing onsite systems. Parts of Title 5 regulations require that systems comply with state-mandated design and performance standards whenever a property is sold. During the selling process, the septic system must be tested for compliance. If the system fails inspection, it must be repaired or replaced with one that meets stringent standards.

While one might think this would be good for business, Wendy Juergens says otherwise.

"The majority of them end up being replaced," and The Pump Grump doesn't do system design or installation, so they have to contract the job out. The company isn't certified to perform inspections, either. They do perform minor repairs, but what's usually required to amend a system failing inspection is far more than is within their scope of services.

The Pump Grump does get pumping business for tanks that must be emptied to make way for a new system to be installed. But for this limited-service firm, Title 5 compliance issues are usually unwelcome.

"Buddy hates to tell people their system is in trouble," Juergens says, "because he knows it's going to cost them a lot of money."

sentations to real estate offices during sales meetings, which has proven fruitful.

A great deal of publicity comes from local newspaper articles. The paper calls every so often to see if Pump Grump has anything going on. Over time, Wendy Juergens has leveraged her marketing experience to develop a good relationship with editors and reporters, who know they can count on her for interesting local content. She usually writes the articles, the latest of which covers a lesson on septic pumping she gave to a homeschooled child under the parents' environmental science curriculum.

One other main effort is personal public relations in the form of her joining her husband in the truck during his rounds.

"Lately," she says, "I go along once every other week, just so people can meet me and put a face with a voice. I also learn something every time. My focus is always teaching people whatever I can about what's in the ground."

Ultimately, they're aiming for as much of the market as they can service. Their market is large enough that they could do business in Foxboro only, if they so desired. As it is, 53 percent of their business is in Foxboro.

VISIBILITY IS KEY

Part of their success is built on the company's visibility. Wendy Juergens tries to qualify phone leads, asking callers how they heard of The Pump Grump. They tell her they've seen the truck. "One guy said, 'I see that truck everywhere!' Buddy's so busy that people think there's more than one truck."

The company doesn't advertise much; some ads and coupons in the local newspaper, and a one-line entry in the Yellow Pages. They also have a Web site, but most of their business comes from networking and referrals. They do one-on-one and group pre-

MORE INFO:

Bay State Truck & Trailer

508/336-9600

Rehoboth, Mass.

www.baystatett.com