

# ON HIS WAY

Just starting out in the pumping industry, Pennsylvania's Brandon Martin has many aspirations for his growing one-truck operation

By Ken Wysocky Photos by Robert Wood



Brandon Martin pauses while letting his vacuum truck do the work of emptying a residential septic tank. Martin prides himself on providing same-day service whenever possible.

Like many young operators in the septic service industry, Brandon Martin is a one-man band with big ambitions. And after two years as the owner of B. Martin Wastewater Services LLC in Garnet Valley, Pa., he's off to a good start, courtesy of some shrewd marketing techniques, a savvy approach to service vehicles and customer service that generates word-of-mouth referrals.

Since he took the business from part time to full time in 2012, Martin, 28, estimates he's increased his customer base by almost 20 percent, to around 625 accounts from about 525. That's no small feat working in an area with stiff competition from about a dozen established operators, including two large companies with dozens of trucks on the road.

"I think it helps that it's just me, myself and I," says Martin, a former dump truck driver who bought an existing septic pumping company in August 2011. "I'm the sole owner, the sole driver, the sole secretary — whatever needs to be done.

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## B. Martin Wastewater Services LLC, Garnett Valley, Pa.

**OWNER:** Brandon Martin  
**FOUNDED:** 2011  
**EMPLOYEES:** 1  
**SERVICE AREA:** 25-mile radius around Garnet Valley, Pa.  
**SPECIALTIES:** Septic and grease trap service  
**WEBSITE:** www.bmwastewater.com



After a residential pumping job, Martin carefully rolls his hose heading back to the truck to remove as much waste from the lines as possible. Leaving a clean work site is important to providing the type of services that keeps customers calling back to the one-man operation.

“Every company should have a website. I didn't spend more than \$600 on mine ... I just wanted something simple to tell a little bit about my company. It's paid for itself many times over.”

- Brandon Martin



## When It Comes to Trucks, Martin Says Beefy is Better

Years of driving dump trucks gives Brandon Martin a different perspective when it comes to buying a vacuum truck for his pumping business. B. Martin Wastewater Services, LLC in Garnet Valley, Pa.

"I want a heavy-duty truck," he says. "I see a lot of guys buy semi tractors, rip off the sleepers, and bolt on tanks. That makes it cheaper, but it's a light-duty truck. I want something that I can depend on for the long haul."

After two months of searching, he found what he was looking for: a 2002 Mack RD688 truck, outfitted by Transport Truck Sales in Kansas City, Kan., with a 3,400-gallon steel tank and a Masport HXL400W pump.

"It's an all-around good truck. Having been in the trucking industry, I knew what to look for and what to avoid," he says.

Martin's Mack features many heavy-duty components, such as a double-frame chassis; a 350 hp E7350 diesel engine; 44,000-pound-capacity rear axles on camelback suspension; and an 18,000-pound-capacity front axle.

"I know it's more than I need, but I believe you can never over-spec a truck," he explains. "With this heavy suspension, it's never going to wear out because you're never working it to its limits. Sure, you pay more for the heavier components, but if you plan on keeping a truck for 10 to 15 years, you pay back your original investment through less downtime and maintenance and less parts replacement — things like bushings, Kingpins and suspensions."

## SMALL BUSINESS EDGE

"It seems like people enjoy supporting small business owners, and I think they feel that because I'm the owner and the route driver, they're going to get a higher level of service because I'm more accountable," he adds. "It's my name on the line, as opposed to a driver who hands them a bill and drives on down the road to the next job."

Driving trucks is second nature for Martin, whose father also was an independent dump truck operator. After high school, Martin drove a dump truck for a road paving company, and planned to be a full-time, independent dump truck operator. Those plans began to shift one winter when, while on a seasonal layoff, he saw an employment ad for a vacuum truck driver at a local pumping company.

Tired of winter layoffs, Martin gave the pumping job a spin. And although he ping-ponged between driving dump trucks and pumping septic tanks for the next several years — and even bought his own dump truck — he remained intrigued by the latter career. So in 2011, when he heard that a local, part-time septic pumper wanted to sell his business, Martin was all ears.

"I really wanted to do septic pumping, but never went out on my own because I thought it would be too hard to start from scratch," he says. "The guy I bought the company from was doing it only part time, but he had a good customer base — enough to give me a nice head start. So I bought him out." Martin drove the dump truck days and the vacuum rig during late afternoons, early evenings and on Saturdays.

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By March of 2012, Martin reached a point where pumping calls increasingly conflicted with his dump truck driving. So he decided to focus entirely on septic pumping and sold the dump truck.

"It was the best thing I ever did — no regrets at all," he says. Today, residential septic tank pumping accounts for about 65 percent of his company's gross revenue; pumping commercial holding tanks generates another 30 percent; and the balance come from pumping grease traps.

## MARKETING 101

After buying the business, Martin focused on a very simple but effective and inexpensive form of marketing: Sending a letter to all the company's existing customers explaining the ownership change, along with a business card and a refrigerator magnet that provided essential contact information. He estimates that about 90 percent of the customers were residential homeowners with septic systems.

"First of all, I had repainted the company's green truck white and re-lettered it, and I didn't want existing customers wondering why a white truck was turning into their driveway instead of a green one," he explains, noting that he felt his blue-and-green logo looks best on a white background.

"Some customers hadn't had their tank pumped in a while, so the letter generated a lot of calls," he says. "My phone was ringing off the hook ... that letter definitely helped out a lot in the beginning. People tend to throw away letters, but they keep the refrigerator magnet."

Martin also aggressively pursued word-of-mouth referrals. After each job, he asks customers if they were pleased with his service, and if so, to please tell neighbors and friends about B. Martin Wastewater. The approach has worked; Martin estimates that 70 percent of his business comes from word-of-mouth referrals.

Martin paid a company to develop a simple business website, and also created a Facebook page for his company to drive a larger digital presence. While those two pieces of his marketing strategy don't generate the bulk of his service calls, he says an Internet presence helps establish the perception that his company is progressive and modern. Moreover, both efforts were relatively inexpensive.

## DIRECT MAIL PAYS

"The website primarily generates emergency calls," notes Martin, who does not spend money on telephone book advertising. "Every company should have a website. I didn't spend more than \$600 on mine ... I just

Martin works the hose on a residential job. One of Martin's marketing tools is offering a small discount on the job if a customer allows him to post a sign promoting his business on the front lawn for a few weeks.



“I always thought that if I built a website and sent out some postcards, customers would come to me like there's no tomorrow. It hasn't quite worked out like that. But I keep telling myself that Rome wasn't built in a day, either. It all takes time.”

- Brandon Martin

if I put up a sign up in their yard for two weeks in exchange for a \$5 or \$10 discount on their pumping charge.

"Now, the signs can be a pain, because sometimes they get stolen, and after two weeks, I've got to drive around and pick them up," he points out. "Because of that, I only put them in yards that are within five or 10 miles of my yard. But I've received a fair number of service calls from them, so they've more than paid for themselves. Some customers even let me do it without the pumping discount."

## GOOD SERVICE IS ESSENTIAL

Of course, word-of-mouth referrals don't occur unless Martin provides great customer service. He does that by following a basic philosophy: Do a good job, be fair and treat customers well. He also educates customers whenever possible, explaining how septic systems work, how often tanks should be cleaned and so forth.

"One of the main things I do differently is to try to hit customers on the same day they call, if at all possible," he explains. "If someone calls me at 10 a.m., I tell them I can get to them that day ... even if it means working until 7

p.m. Now, some days it's just too busy to do that, and I have to do it the next day. But whenever possible, I don't put off jobs because it leaves time open for when the next customer calls or an emergency job pops up."

To provide better service, Martin also strives to keep his service area reasonably small. The treatment plant he uses is close to his yard, so keeping customers within a 25-mile radius helps him, as he puts it, "turn and burn" more loads. "It's a term I learned in the trucking business," he says.

"With so many competitors in the area, I'm very sensitive to providing good service," Martin says. "If a customer is unhappy with your work, all they have to do is Google 'septic tank pumpers' and come up with six guys right off the bat."

## NO PRICE-MATCHING

Despite the competition, Martin says price low-balling is not a problem. There are times when he'll consider matching a price on a commercial job if he can still turn a profit. But for residential jobs, he declines to match prices, noting that customers who price-shop aren't as loyal as those willing to pay his standing rate.

To generate additional small revenue streams, Martin also performs minor septic system repairs — things like installing risers and replacing baffles and tank floats.

"I always push installation of risers because it pays off in the long run, knowing right where the lid is going to be, rather than spending an extra half hour digging it up," he says. "I make money on them, but it's not crazy money."

To improve efficiency, Martin uses QuickBooks software, made by Intuit, Inc. Among other things, the software allows him to compile a customer list where he can record information like customers' tank location, capacity, whether lids are at grade or below grade, and so on.

"That way, if I eventually hire someone, I can give that driver the best information possible to boost productivity," he says. "For example, if I know the capacity of a tank beforehand, I know whether I can handle one more pumping or if I need to make a trip to the treatment plant first."

## LOOKING AHEAD

Martin would like to grow his business to three or four trucks and several employees, and branch out into more commercial work, including hauling treatment plant sludge in a tractor tanker. He's also considering ways to further diversify his business, citing portable restroom rentals as a possibility.

"But that's pretty far down the road," he says. "I want to get three trucks on the road before branching off into other things."

"One thing I underestimated at the start was how hard it would be to get work," he continues. "I always thought that if I built a website and sent out some postcards, customers would come to me like there's no tomorrow. It hasn't quite worked out like that. But I keep telling myself that Rome wasn't built in a day, either. It all takes time." ■

## MORE INFO

Intuit, Inc.  
866/379-6635  
www.intuit.com

Masport, Inc.  
800/228-4510  
www.masportpump.com  
(See ad page 3)

Transport Truck Sales, Inc.  
888/395-7751  
www.transporttruck.com  
(See ad page 75)

## Same Time Next Year

Since he's new to the business, we'll keep tabs on pumper Brandon Martin's progress in the coming year and bring back a Pumper Interview report for readers in 2014. We'll ask him about his equipment, how he's competing with other pumpers in his area, and if his many marketing efforts are paying off. Stay tuned.