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The Logic of Logistics



Software helps
A Company operate
across five states

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The Logic of Logistics

Routing software helps A Company run a smart, efficient operation despite locations scattered across four states

By Carol Brzozowski

Envision this: you own a \$5 million family-run business operating 24 hours a day, with four locations, dozens of employees, thousands of portable restrooms, a fleet of 50 trucks, and a service area that spans five states.

What would be your biggest concern be? Think logistics.

That's the key challenge facing Jeff and Larry Moore, brothers who own the A Company, based in Boise, Idaho. Their father and a few partners started the company 30 years ago, and it has grown significantly, from 50 wooden portable restrooms at the start to 6,000 modern units. The company has locations in northwest Utah, southern Nevada, Phoenix, Ariz., and southwestern Idaho and it also serves eastern Oregon.

"We have a really strong group of team-oriented employees," says Jeff. "There are 63 other people who are very much involved in the operation who make it all work. They've done a tremendous job, from the drivers and the staff in the field to the supervisors who support those in the field."

Making business compute

But it is bytes — lots and lots of them — that help these top-notch human beings create and sustain efficiencies. The company's workhorse is its computer system and its routing software.



Routing software helps A Company technicians like Shawn Atchison (in this photo and below) perform their duties efficiently. Shawn is shown servicing HighTech 1 units from Synergy World.



A Company acquired Clear Computing software five years ago to replace an existing system. Jeff found the new software well suited to A Company's unique challenge of operating in four states.

"We were looking for a way to tie our data and information together with an understanding that our needs were going to change over time," Jeff says. The software reliably creates routes daily without cumbersome route books, cards or sheets. The company prints the information its personnel need each day. The Moores are considering hand-held technology to eliminate even that paperwork.

"For now, we print what we need to do that day, we get it done, and that paperwork all goes away," says Jeff. "It eliminates duplication of effort. In a manual system, if you want to adjust a particular unit or a location, you have to go to a route card and a route card master and wherever else you have data stored and hand-write on it.

P R O F I L E	
A Company, Boise, Idaho	
OWNERS:	Jeff and Larry Moore
YEARS IN BUSINESS:	30
SERVICE AREA:	Portions of Idaho, Arizona, Utah, Oregon and Nevada
SERVICES:	Portable sanitation
EMPLOYEES:	63
BUSINESS INCOME:	\$5 million annually
WEB SITE:	www.acoinc.com

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Jeff Moore

"Now there's just one record of that unit at a particular location. Any change you make, it's made in the system. When you go to print that record, it's a done deal, and there's very little opportunity for duplication."

Tech support essential

A Company needs good technical support. Jeff says the vast majority of technical difficulties come not from software errors but from employees needing assistance. Any time a company

Technology Drives Growth

A Company is a larger operation that benefits greatly from computer software efficiencies. But smaller companies can benefit, too, according to Jeff Moore.

"Every company, no matter what size they are, needs to eventually get into the 21st century," says Jeff, co-owner of A Company. "The danger of talking yourself into staying manual is that you begin to believe that it's simple, it works well, and it's better — when in fact, it's cumbersome."

Jeff believes many smaller operators resist change and growth. "The reality is that the 100-unit restroom companies are going to have to grow in the future," he says. "If you don't have the software to grow with that, it's a serious disadvantage."



Routing software streamlines work for Helen Sherrer and the office staff.



A part of the A Company fleet.

uses software, there's a learning curve. Jeff notes that a good computing company trains its clients. If employees have to learn the software on their own, "You just as well should be in the software business instead of the portable restroom service business," Jeff says.

Office staff — the same people who answer phones and talk with customers — input data to the routing software, which is tied into the billing system. "When a customer calls in, you can initiate a delivery for that customer for today, and then you don't have to worry about making sure that that particular delivery will be billed and invoiced out," Jeff says.

"It ensures you will bill for the work you do without you having to be computer program savvy. You don't have to be a programmer to make it work." The software also helps set prices.

"We use it to help us determine what our costs of operation are based on our costs and our net income," he says. "Pricing has much to do with what our inventory is, what our utilization rates are and what our gross and net incomes are. Those numbers we derive from the system."

Handling emergencies

The software even helps when an emergency forces a change in a route in the middle of the day. "Most of that is handled through dispatching," Jeff says. "If a route's not finished or a partial route has to be handed off to somebody else, that can be done via the computer at the office by virtue of site numbers given

back from the driver." The site numbers are four-digit numbers conveyed to the dispatcher, who can use them to convey addresses to other drivers. The software lends itself to central dispatching "quite well," Jeff says.

The company also uses the software to analyze data for efficiencies and market trends. A Company uses data to determine how many long-term restrooms out on regular rental and how many short-term restrooms are scheduled for weekend use. The company also can determine average income per unit and the number of units out on route. Records list all special events the company serviced for future marketing efforts.

Increased efficiencies

Jeff says the routing software has doubled efficiency. By tying together all operations through a single software system, the company gets similar data from all locations, "instead of mixing and matching and wondering how we're really doing," he says. "Eventually, we will have an even stronger capability for



A reputation for quality service helped A Company win a place as a portable sanitation supplier to the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

pulling and consolidating data than we do today. The software will allow us to basically mainframe data so we can get all of the data in one spot.

A Company has succeeded by main-

taining a focus on what it does best and doing it over and over. The management style is "participatory" and respectful of front-line workers, who spend the most time with customers. "We are support for them; we're not their boss," Jeff says.

Managing growth properly is always a concern for this company, which has such a good reputation that it was picked as a vendor for the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. The company constantly upgrades equipment and modifies business practices to improve service. "We don't own any of our customers," Jeff says. "They all can select whom they will buy from. We recognize that every day."

Operating in four states means knowing the right disposal procedures in each. A Company's options include wastewater treatment plants and various dump sites. For its fleet, the company favors International trucks. For restrooms,



A Company makes it a practice to keep upgrading equipment and finding ways to deliver better service.



Anywhere, in any season, A Company gives its customers clean units backed by well trained technicians.

Synergy World is the manufacturer of choice.

PSAI helps business

Jeff says membership in the Portable

Sanitation Association International (PSAI) has helped his business tremendously. "We learn from PSAI the best business practices in the industry and try to employ those practices," he says. "We

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believe in supporting the association because they are doing their best to keep our industry healthy, and they're our watchdog group out there. We wouldn't be successful in business without the PSAI. We never would have expanded to the multiple states."

A Company also helps out during forest fires and other disasters by supplying portable sanitation units to firefighters and other rescue personnel. "That's where you are truly testing your hiring practices and your ability to bring good people on," Jeff says. "You certainly have to bring some extra help on. Also, with our PSAI connections, we have a lot of friends in our industry, so we can get equipment from them."

During emergencies, A Company finds it necessary to raise rates. "Sometimes we haul that equipment hundreds or thousands of miles, and it costs a lot to mobilize that," he says. "It takes a lot to hire extra people and train them, all at a moment's notice. You get a call that says someone needs 100

restrooms tonight, and that means a group of people are going to be working some serious overtime. That entails higher rates."

Family business challenges

Jeff says a key challenge for A Company is functioning as a family business. "The fortunate thing is we've been in business long enough to know that every family member brings a strength that adds success to the team, and the business would not be there without their strength," he says.

"Many families don't make it long enough to discover the fruits of that. The reality is that it takes some time and some in-fighting to figure it out, and then all of a sudden, you're tighter than you could ever be. I wouldn't want any other partner than my brother Larry. He's top notch."

The growth path continues: Jeff says that within five years, A Company could have one more operation, most likely in the West. All the more reason to have technology tying it all together. ■