B ack in 2000, Tom Arts and his wife, Candy, bought A-1 Septic in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Today, the diverse service business has roughly doubled in revenue, a statistic that confirms they made the right choice when they took a big financial gamble so many years ago.

“I had always wanted to be a self-employed plumber” says Tom Arts, who worked in management in a local factory before buying into the wastewater industry. “And when the former owner called me out of the blue and asked me if I wanted to buy the business, I was ready to make a change in my career. I was 43 years old … and Candy said if we don’t do it now, we never will.

“It was quite a risk to take — basically putting on the line everything we owned at the time,” he continues. “Looking back, it was pretty scary. We worked
day and night to make it a successful business — and we still do.”

The formula for growth wasn’t complicated: Work hard. Give customers the kind of service the Arts would want to receive. Hire good employees, and treat them like family. Invest in good equipment, and keep it clean and well-maintained. Land-apply waste whenever possible to reduce disposal costs. And resist the temptation to match the prices offered by low-balling competitors.

“Some people think you shouldn’t make money, so they ask you to beat competitors’ prices,” Arts says. “But we don’t get into bidding wars with our competitors. We sell ourselves on providing good service and on the fact that we’ll be here for our customers for a long time to come.

“I’ve never believed in the philosophy of selling customers the cheapest service possible,” he adds, noting that in order to succeed, prices have to cover overhead expenses. “We’d rather emphasize that we do a good job and make customers happy.”

**TOM ARTS**

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**GEARED FOR GROWTH**

Arts says he and Candy were lucky the business had been well-run previously, which gave them a good head start. The business also was already diversified, offering repair/maintenance and installations and inspections in addition to pumping. The company also rents and services a small number of portable restrooms.

Good employees have played a huge role in the company’s growth. “They’re our biggest asset — the ones going out every day and meeting our customers,” Arts says. “And if the customers like your employees, they’ll stay with you. In fact, it’s not uncommon for our customers to request a specific driver, and we do our best to make that work (from a routing perspective).”

The company’s employees are: Shannon Murray, office manager; Bob England, vacuum truck operator and truck-maintenance coordinator; Greg Golden, vacuum truck operator and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources compliance coordinator; truck operators Terry Petersen, Rob Dalka, and Buck Mahner; Chris Gebert, shop maintenance and portable sanitation technician; James Sirota, plumber, soil tester and permit specialist; Casey Sackett, plumber, senior soil tester, septic system installer and safety coordinator; Dustin Augustine, plumber, installer, and route and service coordinator; and Doug Keintz, machine operator and installation crew.

Employees who represent themselves well in the field develop good relationships with customers, which is something Arts encourages. “I tell them (continued)
it’s not about the numbers — doing the job and getting out of there as fast as they can,” he says. “I don’t care if they spend 20 minutes with a customer, even if they’re just talking about the weather. It’s all about building relationships.”

Growth generally came across the board in all the company’s service sectors. Early on, installation of systems at new residential homes dominated. But as new-home construction waned over the years, there’s been more emphasis on replacing aging, failing systems — many times at lakeside properties.

**Inspections are good for business**

Septic system inspections are an effective way to attract new customers and add another revenue stream to a pumping business. But pumpers should be aware of the risks before they obtain an inspection license, says veteran inspector and installer Tom Arts, owner of A-1 Septic.

“It’s a good business to get into,” Arts says. “But if you’re ever going to get sued as a pumper, inspections are where it’s going to happen.

“Sometimes you’re doing an evaluation of a system and you don’t know what kind of modifications have been made and you can’t see underground,” he continues. “Or maybe the home has been vacant for, say, five years, so no problems are evident. Then two months after someone buys the house, they call and say the septic system isn’t working. … You have to know what you’re doing.”

When Arts inspects a long-vacant home, he looks for evidence that the liquid level was higher than the normal operating level inside a septic tank. “Water stains are a good indicator,” he says. “They indicate a problem in the drainfield or in a pipe between the tank and the drainfield. You have to leave no stone unturned (during inspections). You also should look at the county’s records for the tank, if they’re available.”

Performing inspections can lead to pumping work or even new system installations. But communication is critical, Arts notes, pointing out that all parties involved in a home sale — the real estate agents for the seller and buyer, and the homeowner and homebuyer, too — need to be on the same page. “That can be very time-consuming,” Arts says. “But it’s worth it to keep everyone in the loop.”

That often poses a problem because smaller lots don’t typically include enough space for another conventional septic system. But in those instances, Arts says the company increasingly relies on Eljen Corp. geotextile sand filter pretreatment systems, which require substantially less space than conventional septic drainfields.

“We recently installed one at Crescent Lake, just a couple of miles from our shop. We were able to install a four-bedroom drainfield in a space that was only 13 feet wide and 41 feet long,” he explains. “We don’t use this product for every job, but it gives us another tool in our toolbox to offer to customers. Newer technology gives you a lot more flexibility.”

Arts says he typically uses concrete tanks from Dalmaray Concrete Products Inc. But at properties where delivery isn’t feasible, he uses plastic tanks from Infiltrator Water Technologies. For drainfields, he uses Advanced Drainage Systems ARC 36 chambers.

**MANY REVENUE STREAMS**

A-1 Septic does more than just pump septic tanks. At the annual four-day Hodag Country Festival, held in July in Rhinelander, the company pumps holding tanks with up to 10,000-gallon capacities. Last year, the company hauled more than 200,000 gallons of waste from RVs, portable restrooms and showers in 47 truckloads.

The company dedicates one truck to the event on Thursday, the first day of the country-music festival, and two trucks on the three remaining days as attendance at the event increases. “There’s a lot of traffic, so it’s very time-
consisting,” Arts says of the event, which typically attracts about 50,000 people. “It might take an hour to go 1 mile and get into festival grounds because our drivers have to use the same route as all the attendees.”

A-1 Septic also hauls leachate collected from a landfill operated by a local paper mill. After pumping out the leachate from three collection points, technicians transfer it to a treatment facility that’s also owned by the paper mill, Arts says.

To handle the company’s diverse services, the owners have invested in a sizable fleet of equipment. For starters, they own five vacuum trucks: a 2005 International 7600 with a 5,000-gallon steel tank and National Vacuum Equipment pump built out by Imperial Industries, a 2005 Mack Granite with a 5,000-gallon steel Imperial tank and Masport liquid-cooled pump, a 2003 Sterling with a 4,800-gallon steel Imperial tank and Masport liquid-cooled pump, a 2007 Kenworth T800 with a 4,800-gallon steel tank and Masport pump built out by Curry Supply Co., and a 2012 Peterbilt 356 with a 4,850-gallon steel tank and liquid-cooled Jurup/Chandler pump built by Pik Rite.

For system installations, the company relies on a John Deere loader backhoe and a Mack quad-axle dump truck. The company also owns roughly 50 portable restrooms — primarily Aspen models from Five Peaks — used mostly for construction rentals and weddings. To service those restrooms, the company also owns a GMC 3500 flatbed carrying a 300-gallon waste/100-gallon freshwater slide-in aluminum tank with Jurup/Chandler pump built by Specialty B Sales.

A-1 Septic’s service area includes three treatment plants. But because septage disposal costs $50 to $60 per 1,000 gallons, Arts says the company land-applies most of its waste on property it either rents or owns. The company pumps more than 6 million gallons of waste annually, and Arts says 75 percent of it is land-applied.

“We try to be very strategic about how we handle waste,” Arts explains. “For example, holding tank waste is less expensive to dispose of than septic tank waste, so we might take holding tank waste to a treatment center if it makes sense.”

STEADY GROWTH EXPECTED

Looking ahead, Arts says he anticipates measured, not exponential, growth. One thing he isn’t planning on, though: relying on the same-old, same-old to stay successful. “We’re always trying to improve,” he says. “If you sit back and think you’ve got it all figured out, you’ll find you don’t.”

To ensure continued improvement, Arts says he and Candy take notes on potential changes throughout the year and then meet at the end of the year to review their ideas. The approach has worked well. “We’re pretty proud that we’ve doubled the size of the business in 17 years,” he notes. “That’s the result of a lot of hard work and keeping customers happy. You can’t make everyone happy, but you have to try.”

Arts says he and Candy feel a great deal of pride about their pumping company.

“After a hard day, we still like to talk about what we’ve accomplished. We’ve provided a good place to work for a lot of people,” Arts reflects. “I can’t stress enough how much value there is in having good employees. ... We treat them like family, and they are like a family. In the big scheme of things, I’m glad we took the risk we did 17 years ago.”

I don’t care if (service technicians) spend 20 minutes with a customer, even if they’re just talking about the weather. It’s all about building relationships.”

TOM ARTS

MORE INFO

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From Erick, Jennifer, Andrew and the crew at ERICKSON Tank & Pump

Christmas greetings to our many valued customers.

We wish you peace and joy for the holidays.

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