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Built From Scratch



Johnny On The Spot creates a state-of-the-art headquarters

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Built From Scratch

A new, state-of-the-art facility helps Johnny On the Spot increase its operating efficiency and improve service to customers

By Carol Brzozowski-Gardner

Jess Thompson had been frustrated for a long time. His portable sanitation business, Johnny On The Spot, Inc., in Old Bridge, N.J., was ready for rapid expansion, but his facilities were not. Jess had been renting 6,000 square feet of space for 18 years and had rented an acre a mile away for portable sanitation unit storage.

"We had this real inefficiency going on between where the toilets were actually repaired and where they were stored," says Jess. One garage housed portable sanitation units and served as a maintenance depot for the units and trucks — yet it had just one door for access.

"It was terrible," Jess recalls. "We would be doing one function and a need for the other function would pop up. It was almost impossible. We were moving

"It was a unique opportunity. Most companies do what they have to do because of site constraints, whereas this was a chance to build the facility from the ground up, specifically for this use. I was able to create a flow here that was very desirable."

Jess Thompson

stuff so inefficiently, just to get a truck in or out." Employees had to work the schedule so that the two functions would not clash, yet as the company grew, it needed both functions all day. Eventually, the company could not hire more people because there were no parking spaces or workstations for them. It didn't pay to buy more equipment because there was no room to store more trucks.

Reaching for the blue sky

Mostly because of New Jersey's strict zoning laws, Jess had to wait more than a decade to get approval for a location that made good business sense. As he waited, he had time for "blue sky" thinking. He tossed articles, notes and other ideas into files. Then, after he secured the ideal 4.5-acre piece of property, he started sketching building designs.

"We started to incorporate our operations into the site plan," Jess says. "We moved the buildings around. I started to actually put portable toilets on the site



Johnny On The Spot invested in an attractive exterior for its new building in the interest of creating a professional image.

plan in banks so that I knew how the flow was going to work. It was a unique opportunity. Most companies do what they have to do because of site constraints, whereas this was a chance to build the facility from the ground up, specifically for this use. I was able to create a flow here that was very desirable."

Three years ago, Jess turned his dreams into reality. As a result, business has almost doubled. The company moved to its new site with 3,000 units. There are now 5,000. "I projected some growth into the design, but we're there already," Jess says. "I'm now talking to the neighbors on all three sides about purchasing more land and expanding."

Moving to the new facility was like "unfastening our belt," Jess says. "We were able to hire a whole bunch of people," he says. "The company just wanted to grow. We had a pent-up demand for the service we were providing."

The facility gained notice from the Portable Sanitation Association International: Some members toured it in spring 2002. "We heard over and over again from our visitors that the facility is special," Jess says.

Service quality increases

Johnny On The Spot and Jess's other company, Central Jersey Septic, are separate corporations but are housed in the

Sharp Inside, Sharp Outside

In designing a new facility for Johnny On The Spot portable sanitation, Jess Thompson devoted a great deal of thought to its appearance.

"We wanted to attract top-notch people, so we spent a lot of extra money on the look and feel of our place," Jess says. For example, the 4,500-square-foot office has a green metal canopy, large white columns and extensive landscaping. It also has a full kitchen and an outdoor patio.

His builder questioned spending so much money on aesthetics. "I told him that in my business, it's very important to raise the bar, not only for the public's perception of what we do, but for our employees as well," says Jess. "We tried very hard throughout the property — not just in the front — to pay close attention to that."

same facility. Of the 85 employees, 73 work for Johnny On The Spot. The company serves two-thirds of New Jersey and handles special events in Staten Island and Manhattan, N.Y.

Jess says that what separates his operation from others is his employees' dedication. The new facility helped Johnny On The Spot to service customers quickly and consistently and expand its customer base. Besides being efficient, the facility is safe and ergonomically designed. The set-up has reduced accidents and Worker's Compensation claims.

In designing the facility, Jess started by creating an attractive 4,500-square-foot office. Jess chose attractive, comfortable office furniture and laid out the work-

P R O F I L E

Johnny On The Spot and Central Jersey Septic, Old Bridge, N.J.

OWNERS:	Jess and Sharon Thompson
YEAR FOUNDED:	1969 and 1970
SERVICES:	Portable sanitation; septic maintenance, installation and inspections
EMPLOYEES:	85
SERVICE AREA:	New Jersey, New York
MEMBERSHIPS:	Portable Sanitation Association International, New Jersey Septage Management Association, Pennsylvania Septage Management Association
WEB SITE:	www.johnnyonthespot.com



Johnny On The Spot technicians work on restroom service trucks in the company's new transfer station. Photo at left: Marv Hyer (left) and Stan Ivins; photo at lower left, Ivins; photo below, Hyer.



"The trucks outside back up to what we call the 'hot fence.' The drivers plug in the engine blocks and tank valves; they're able to keep warm at night. Our trucks carrying fresh water for our potable water systems go inside. The other trucks carry a brine solution and they're OK outside on most nights here."

Jess Thompson

stations to follow the typical workflow. Employees who serve drivers and customers are in the same area, while support personnel, such as bookkeeping and human resources, use other space. The company uses Clear Computing software for inventory, billing, pick-up and delivery, and routing. "It's a database that has all the whistles and bells that you need," Jess says.

The office adjoins a 10,500-square-foot garage with mechanic bays. A separate 4,800-square-foot building is a load transfer station and restroom repair facility. Up to 22 of the company's 46 tank trucks

are stored inside during winter. "The trucks outside back up to what we call the 'hot fence,'" says Jess. The drivers plug in the engine blocks and tank valves; they're able to keep warm at night. Our trucks carrying fresh water for our potable water systems go inside. The other trucks carry a brine solution and they're OK outside on most nights here." Besides the tankers, the company has 5 pick-ups and 23 trailers.

Mechanics' wishes granted

A vestibule serves as a transition area between office and garage. There, drivers

punch in and out, handle paperwork, check their mailboxes, review the following day's work, and print out route maps on a computer. A locker room for changing into rented uniforms has a club-like feel with color-coordination, tile floors, vending machines and light music piped in. The septic company offices are upstairs on a mezzanine.

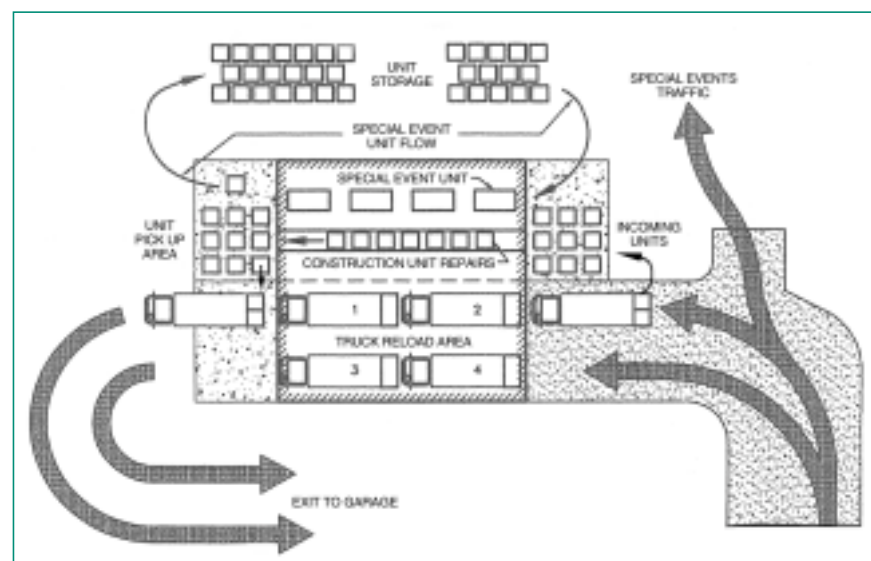
When it came to the mechanic bay design, Jess encouraged his tenured staff to "wish out loud." There are air jacks throughout the garage. There's 220-volt power for welding, inside and out. Oil is automatically dispersed from and drained into reservoirs. A floor drain enables mechanics to wash trucks inside. Computer diagnostics plug into the truck engines. There is a large and well-organized parts room. There also is a computer for tracking vehicle maintenance.

"The Department of Transportation requires drivers to fill out a sheet every night on what's wrong with their trucks," says Jess. "We give a copy of that sheet to a data entry person in the office. What the driver writes is automatically entered onto a 'pick list,' or a total list of all repairs to be completed, which is available through our network to the mechanics."

The garage has five doublewide, double-deep bays. Only trucks being repaired — usually three to six at a time — are inside during the summer.

Transfer station

About 500 feet behind the garage is the transfer station. Drivers coming onto the property enter through an electronic gate for which they have a remote control.



This diagram illustrates the workflow at the Johnny On The Spot transfer station.



Portable restrooms roll into the repair shop at Johnny On The Spot's new facility in Old Bridge, N.J.

water through a two-inch hose; they do not have to climb atop the truck.

"That's a real improvement from the other site," Jess notes. There were injuries at the former site, especially in the winter, when it was icy. Two-inch hoses hanging from the ceiling dispense salt water for winter. The fully computerized brine system recognizes which station is calling for salt water and which of the two tanks is in a position to send it.

"This computerized brine system is really quite elaborate," Jess says. "It kept evolving from a much simpler idea. I'm very proud of it because it's extremely efficient. I

haven't seen anything like it." Ceiling-mounted hoses also fill trucks with pump and motor oils and provide air for tires. Next to the truck parking is an area stocked with toilet tissue, deodorant blocks, extra brushes, hoses, wands — whatever drivers need to ready their trucks for the next day.

Units on a roll

Drivers pulling into the port with restrooms unload them onto an incoming pad. Construction site units are washed, placed on a roller system and sent through the other side of the building for repair. Upon completion, the units are placed on an outgoing pad near the exit

door of the truck port. Drivers load the units they need for the next day before leaving this area.

The parallel flow of trucks and toilets almost eliminates the need to store and handle construction toilets in the peak season. Special event units are staged in the yard to be cleaned and loaded for the following day. Excess units are stored in an outdoor yard.

Marvin Hyer, operations manager (20 years with the company), oversees the

manager. Steve Merklin (14 years) does an outstanding job running our excavation division," Jess says.

Sharon Thompson, Jess' wife, oversees both firms' bookkeeping and financial needs. "Sharon's thoughtful perspective on people issues and company direction has been an often-overlooked company asset," Jess notes. "Many of the company's employees have been here more than ten years and some of our most enthusiastic are just starting."

"I learned a long time ago that if you have loyal employees, do everything you possibly can for them and expect the same in return. I feel I had to make a choice: either give my employees the resources they request or don't hold them accountable for the results."

Jess Thompson

toilet operations. Teresa Hyer (nine years) is office manager, Andy Bennett is route manager, Dan Ritter is dispatcher, and Stanley Ivins orchestrates unit preparations. Employees communicate on cell phones or pagers.

Jess built the facility with his employees in mind. "I learned a long time ago that if you have loyal employees, do everything you possibly can for them and expect the same in return," he says. "I feel I had to make a choice: either give my employees the resources they request or don't hold them accountable for the results."

Giving free rein

Jess says one premise of his company's success is in the strong team approach and his willingness to loosen the reins on key employees. "Ron Hyer (21 years) runs our septic company; Susan Ivins (14 years) is the septic office

Jess advises other operators who would like to free up more of their time to share goals and concepts with competent staff members, then allow them to take ownership of the specific solutions. "However, it does take very dedicated, ambitious people for this to succeed, and you must be committed to compensating them fairly," Jess points out.

"Not only has that helped this company to grow faster from a sales standpoint, but it has also helped us to retain ambitious employees. "Sharon and I are very fortunate to have no customers or employees waiting for our arrival each morning. It seems like a lot of sacrifices would have to be made to have the freedom not to arrive on any given day, but there have been none. Our people are thriving on the challenges and opportunities this presents to them." ■

Automatic lights at the entry come on at night. The truck port has four positions and is akin to a drive-through car wash, Jess says. "You drive into this thing and you're blocked from the wind and the elements, but it's open on both ends," he says. "When drivers pull into one of the four places, they are able to complete several tasks from that position."

The company has a licensed waste storage system via four-inch hose hook-ups through the concrete floor into an underground holding area with an 8,000-gallon capacity. Twice daily during the busy season, Central Jersey Septic trucks run two 5,400-gallon loads to one of five regional wastewater treatment plants. Drivers can fill their trucks with fresh