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Installer's Helper

An Ohio distributor uses knowledge of onsite systems to support installers, build a base of satisfied customers, and expand his business

By Doug Day

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Pete Eversole does more than sell pipes and other septic system components to installers. As the owner of That Septic Place in Amelia, Ohio, Eversole believes his job is to know the installation business so that he can sell installers what they need to do the job right — which is not always the same thing as what installers say they want.

After 15 years working in a paper mill and five years as a union president, Eversole began working for the former owner of That Septic Place about two years ago. Within a few months, he decided to buy the business when the owner retired. A distributor of Puraflo peat biofiltration systems when he took over the business, he soon decided to expand and become a full-service supplier. "I sell materials for a variety of mound systems, plus leach lines, sand filters and other things of that nature," says Eversole.

"What I tried to do is branch out so that if a contractor was building a sand filter for a three-bedroom home, I would have everything he would need and could deliver it to the site." His customers operate in a mostly rural area, and the closest big-box supply store is about 20 miles away. He is the only one in the area who carries everything an installer might need.

"You can get tanks from me, or drop boxes, distribution boxes, piping, fittings, control panels, pumps — I try to have everything so they don't have to go to several places to get the materials they need," he says. Using a set-up in his shop, he can even create pipe with the appropriate pre-drilled orifices.

After the sale

While many other businesses could do that, it's after the sale that Eversole has found a way to stand out. "Someone might call me and say, 'I'm doing a Wisconsin mound and I've never done one,'" he says. "So I'll get the book out and go over the county specs with him and furnish him with all the materials. Sometimes they'll call back asking 'Where does this go?' and I'll go out to the jobsite and then lay it out."

There is no charge for the extra expertise. He explains his approach as one of helper and supporter, "to make sure that once they get everything installed, the county isn't



going to tag the system for something little.”

Most problems with regulators are relatively minor things that could have been prevented. “I’ve seen systems turned down because they didn’t use stainless steel screws in the float bracket,” Eversole says. To help prevent those occurrences, he makes sure he delivers only parts he knows the county will accept. If a new part comes on the market, he checks with the regulators first to make sure it will be acceptable to them.

Regulations are changing fast in Ohio as the state tries to standardize all counties around new statewide regulations. Eversole finds he can help installers keep up with the changes and learn how to use the new technologies that are coming out. Mound systems aren’t yet common to his area.

Eversole knows how to install mound systems and what it takes to pass inspection. “Once you get past the technical mumbo jumbo, it’s basically the same,” he says. “You have your laterals and two or three feet of sand. You’re just putting everything above the ground. I know everything the county is going to require and will go to the jobsite to sit down with the contractor to go over details, like how much drain back the county will require or how much dose volume they want.”

Fast-growing area

Eversole serves installers in about five counties around Amelia, 30 miles east of Cincinnati. About 80 percent of his business is in Clermont County, the fastest-growing county in Ohio, which also happens to have the strictest regulations for onsite wastewater systems in the area.



Despite state-level steps toward standardizing all the counties, at present contractors still have to get a permit in each county where they want to work. Each county still has its own regulations and, more important, its own regulators with their own interpretations and preferences.

Eversole knows them, works with them, and treats them with respect — as he would treat a customer. He says he gets the same treatment in return and as a result has solved or prevented many problems for installers and homeowners.

In one case, an installer was told he would have to put a system 500 yards from the house — and that meant putting an access road just to get to the jobsite. Eversole asked the regulator if something could be worked out. He met with the regulator onsite, and together they found a good location just 50 feet from the home. It turned out, the real problem was the way the homeowner had treated the regulator. “You treat them with respect and they’re going to give it back to you,” says Eversole.

Growth in pretreatment

From what he hears from regulators, Eversole thinks the future in Ohio over the next three years lies with pretreatment systems. About half of all onsite systems installed now are alternative systems like Wisconsin mounds, millennium mounds or systems that use pretreatment technologies like peat biofilters or aerobic treatment units.

Though the new state regulations aren’t yet final, Eversole suspects that even mounds may be a thing of the past in his area because of its high water table and low-permeability soils. Sand filters are already banned in most of Clermont County.

Eversole tries to help established contractors move away from the habits of the past 30 years and adapt to the new regulations and technologies. He shows them that it’s not that hard to install new and different systems once they learn the basics and start doing it. Contractors quickly learn how to work with mound systems, Eversole has found, but that hasn’t hurt his repeat business. In fact, he’s getting more. “They know I do everything I can to



keep them out of trouble with the county,” he says. In one county, Eversole has even designed some systems and has never had one rejected.

At all hours

Since he's a one-man operation, all the extra service can lead to some long hours, especially in spring and summer. But customers know to call ahead before stopping by the shop, and they know that Eversole will come in at any hour to help them out.

More than half his gross sales are from Puraflo peat biofilters — he will deliver at least 47 of those systems this year, versus 27 last year. He wouldn't be surprised to see that grow to 120 systems a year within two years. He has outfitted about 40 Wisconsin and millennium mound systems this year, compared to two Wisconsin mounds last year.



The millennium mound, he says, was not used in his area until Clermont County starting allowing them — limited use in 2001, and for more widespread use in 2003.

It was then he decided to start offering a millennium mound package. “I could sell individual parts, such as a control panel, pumps or laterals, but I couldn't offer my own millennium mound package until I had it approved,” he says.

Eversole approached Clermont County regulators and submitted plans they could review. As a result, his millennium package was added to the county's list of approved systems in June 2004. Since Clermont is the strictest of the area counties, most of the others accept anything that meets the Clermont standards.

Efforts like that have helped That Septic Place double its business this year. Eversole does no advertising outside of some hats he gives away to installers. The regulatory changes have helped him grow, but Eversole attributes the referrals to word-of-mouth and going beyond selling — installers know that he will take care of them.

“I've had people tell me I'm wasting time and wasting gas,” he says. “The way I look at it, if I treat someone right, then the next time they're putting in a system, they're going to call me.”

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