

PRESSURE TO GROW

A Wisconsin waterblasting and industrial service company makes a quick impression with a commitment to safety and service excellence

By Doug Day

Five years ago, Chris Koga and George Radtke were starting a new waterblasting company. They had formed a partnership with a local man — mainly because he owned a vacuum truck — and had taken a loan for two waterblasters and two pickups.

It was January of 2001, a new year, a new business operated out of Koga's home, and their eyes were on growth. Look at them today. Their business, H₂O Underpressure Inc., has \$2 million in annual revenue and is based in a 20,000-square-foot building in Dale, Wis.

The firm does water, aggregate, and dry ice blasting, waterjetting, and hydroexcavation. Its crews work in power plants, paper mills, and water and wastewater treatment plants. Koga, owner and president, and Radtke oversee 22 employees and have just started a hydroexcavation firm they hope will grow as large as its parent company.

The firm succeeds with an unwavering commitment to safety, a willingness to innovate, and a commitment to invest in ways to serve customers better.

"It was a challenge, and it still is," says Koga. Radtke, president of the hydroexcavation division, never thought they would get so big so soon. "There have been a lot of times I thought we were growing too fast," he says. "But it seems to be working out, and I'm glad I talked Chris into going out on his own."

Straightforward style

Koga has a straightforward attitude toward work life. "You have to like your

job, otherwise why do it?" he says. "We're all here to make money and have a good time doing it." His employees are all members of the Teamsters Union. Even if some of the workers don't think a union is necessary, Koga doesn't want it any other way.

"There are still a few very strong union paper mills and power plants out there," he says, and he doesn't want to give up that work. "The union has never been a problem. They work very well with us, and they work very well with the men. I've never had an issue there." The firm has had very little turnover because Koga and Radtke seek out experienced workers. "They've been pulling off miracles left and right since day one, so we want to try to keep them happy," Radtke says.

Koga prefers negotiating directly with his employees rather than union officials. "For the most part, it's whatever the men want," he says. "If this company can afford to do it while maintaining a sound business, I'm going to give it to them."

That attitude probably stems from 15 years working for a father-son operation,

doing the same type of work. Two of the sons left to start their own companies, and the father turned the company over to another son. That led to some conflicts, which prompted Koga to join a national services company running an office near Appleton, Wis. That's where he met Radtke.

They worked well together and Koga wanted to take Radtke along to another company that wanted to hire him. Meanwhile, his current employer was



This NLB hydroblaster, capable of up to 20,000 psi or 60 gpm, is one of five hydroblasters in the fleet of H₂O Underpressure, which started with one blaster just five years ago.

PROFILE

H₂O UNDERPRESSURE INC. AND SAFE EXCAVATING WITH H₂O DALE, WIS.

OWNER:	Chris Koga	
FOUNDED:	2001	
EMPLOYEES:	22	
ANNUAL REVENUE:	\$2 million plus	
SPECIALTIES:	Waterblasting, vacuuming, jetting, hydroexcavation	
WEB SITE:	www.h2ounderpressure.com	





James Koga and Rick Criscione tunnel under a concrete driveway to help a customer install a 3-inch conduit for electrical wiring. Owner Chris Koga says he tries to help customers any way he can, even if it involves calling a competitor.

getting ready to file bankruptcy for a second time. Radtke suggested that Koga had a good base of customers who liked him; maybe it was time to venture out on his own.

Growth starts early

They started a small waterblasting company and soon formed a partnership with a local cleaning contractor who had a vacuum truck they could use. Nine months later, they bought out that company. About two years later, they purchased a competing company — which happened to be operated by one of the sons who had split off from the family-owned business where Koga first worked.

Looking back, Koga now considers that a mistake. “I will never buy another competitor company; I don’t care how big I am,” he says. “I’ll put them out of business first because it’s a lot cheaper.” The firm did get three vacuum trucks, four waterblasters, and four pickups in the transaction, but the equipment

wasn’t in very good shape, and the company’s customer base didn’t yield much work. So they traded in everything for brand new equipment.

They also bought a vacuum truck with a hydroexcavation attachment and started branching out. Needing a place to house the equipment, they built their new headquarters in 2004. Today, the company’s fleet includes:

- Five waterblasters: Four NLB Corp. 10,000 psi/30 gpm units and one Jetstream 10,000 psi/60 gpm that can be converted to 20,000 psi. These units remove hardened resins, scale, paint, coatings, concrete and other materials from drains, sewers, stacks and tanks.

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Chris Koga

- Two Guzzler vacuum trucks for collecting wet and dry materials from boilers, dust collectors and hoppers
- One Vactor hydroexcavator/vacuum truck
- Two Meyers sewer jetters
- One dry ice (CO₂) blaster for waterblasting in food-grade facilities
- Three aggregate blasters
- Two large air compressors
- Eight pickup trucks.

Building relationships

H₂O Underpressure does hydroblasting work in boilers and tanks and uses the equipment to clean smokestacks and cut concrete. The firm also does sewer jetting, aggregate blasting and, for food-

grade locations, dry ice (CO₂) blasting. The vacuuming includes work with sand and gravel, muck, caustics and acids. Four coatings companies hire H₂O to do coatings removal work.

Relationships with others in the industry get the company work all around the country. Koga considers that a payback for treating people right. He helped one friend start a company that does non-destructive blasting tests in power plants. In return, the friend hired H₂O to do waterblasting work in North Dakota and Minnesota. Another friend started a grit-blasting company and now contracts with H₂O to help him in places

Growing Pains

Growth for H₂O Underpressure Inc. has not been without its challenges.

“We grew so fast that I had a few customers who had concerns because I wasn’t out on the job like I used to be,” says owner Chris Koga. But when customers see that he and partner George Radtke share the same philosophy, they soon grow comfortable.

“They know that when they see George, they’re going to get the same work and ethics they would get from me,” says Koga. “When they call for work, it doesn’t matter how busy we are. We find a way to take care of it. There’s always a way to take care of their needs.”

That might even involve hiring a competitor to help at crunch time. Koga says that’s better than sending the customer directly to a competitor. “It’s taking care of the customer’s needs,” he says. “My customers know that they only have to make one phone call and, one way or another, I’ll get the job done for them.”



Showing off a portion of H₂O Underpressure’s equipment, including Koga’s custom Harley Davidson motorcycle, are from left: Randy Hedtke, George Radtke, Stuart Stelow, Jerry Ryan, Gail Wallner, Will Cox, Sherry Rodgers, Nick DeShaney, Mike Berendsen, Chris Koga, and James Koga. Not shown are Dean Watson, Dustin Koga, Mike Rettler, Rick Criscione, Tim DeShaney, Brian Iwanski, Arnie Kaun, Anita Terry, Ryan Van Price and Dan Drephal.

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like Wyoming, Kentucky and Iowa.

The hydroexcavation company has also grown. For union reasons, Koga and Radtke found it advantageous to form a new company in the summer of 2006 called Safe Excavating with H₂O.

Hydroexcavation is becoming more and more popular. “Municipalities are dictating that this is the only way you’ll dig because they don’t want fiber optics hit; they don’t want natural gas lines hit,” Koga says. “Why take a chance when there’s a piece of equipment out there that will dig it without risk of damage?”

Safety, then production

While getting the job done is important, Koga’s trademarked slogan, “Safety and Production — In That Order,” illustrates his first thought. “We pride ourselves on our safety,” he says. “We have the best safety record in the state for what we do.”

His company’s insurance EMR (experience modification rating) is 0.77. A rating of 1.0 is average, so that essentially

means that H₂O Underpressure is 23 percent safer than average. EMR is a comparison of workers’ compensation claims to those of other employers of similar size operating in the same type of business.

The safety record doesn’t come from luck, Koga says. Safety is preached every day, and workers have quarterly safety training meetings. New hires receive eight to 16 hours of safety training when they start with the company.

“I worked for 15 years wondering where I was going to find a face shield, where to get a rain suit,” Koga says. He doesn’t want that for his employees, so he gives them about \$1,000 worth of personal protective equipment (PPE) every day. “They’re issued an equipment bag with two of everything they need to protect themselves and to get the job done safely and efficiently.” In the shop, there is a supply of PPE worth up to \$10,000, always available to replace broken or worn out equipment.

All employees at H₂O are drug-tested and certified in the appropriate safety areas:

- Hazardous materials (HAZMAT)
- Confined space/confined-space rescue
- OSHA 10 plus and OSHA 30
- Lockout/tagout
- CPR and first aid
- Fall protection
- Heat stress
- Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) standards
- Recovery boilers
- Man lift use.

Doing it better

Since the company works in so many different plants and mills, Koga is constantly updating the safety book, using practices from each customer location. “We take every customer’s safety book and pull out all of their stuff to make ours,” Koga says. “That’s all part of how we keep anybody from getting hurt.”

Koga says purchasing agents look at the dollar, so he gets out in the field with the customers’ supervisors who are trying to get work done both quickly and safely. He picked up one boiler job three years ago by convincing the company that he could save the customer \$40,000, and do it in less time.

And he delivered, turning a 10-day shutdown into a seven-day shutdown while saving his customer \$56,000. He’s been working for that customer for three years now, extending their operating period between shutdowns from about three months to five or six months.

The difference, he believes, is that he is always looking for new ways to work. Other contractors “don’t want to spend money on new, innovative ways because they’ve been doing it this way for years,” he says. “I’m able to beat them because there is always a better way of doing something.”

Investing for customers

Just like safety, productivity requires investment, and Koga doesn’t hesitate to spend the money — like the \$15,000 he spent on an apparatus for that boiler customer’s last outage. “We tried it, it



H₂O owner and president Chris Koga doesn’t hesitate when it comes to investing in equipment, like this Vector-Guzzler 27-inch wet/dry vacuum with consistent unloading capabilities.



The newest addition to the H₂O fleet is a Vactor-Guzzler hydroexcavator for its new company called Safe Excavating with H₂O.

worked, and it made the customer happier.” So happy, in fact, that the customer told Koga they would pay for the equipment. The \$15,000 was just a fraction of the \$150,000 the customer spends every hour for replacement power while the boiler is shut down.

Keeping customers happy helps the company, and that pays off for employees. “We’re here to make money,” Koga stresses. “If I can’t get all my employees to make money and make a little money myself, then I’m not doing something right, and I might as well close the doors and go back to working for someone else.

“I don’t think this company will ever get big enough that I’ll lose that mentality of taking care of the employees.” ■

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