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Red Carpet Treatment

First Class Rentals provides
Texas-sized event service

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Red Carpet TREATMENT

Royal special event restrooms provide the crowning touch for Texas-based First Class Rentals

By Ken Wysocky

Portable restrooms usually aren't the hot topic of conversation at a ritzy special event — unless First Class Rentals is involved. Owner Frank Ballback relishes how his company flips conventional perceptions of portable restrooms on their collective ear with posh, upscale units. They're so nice, patrons actually welcome — not dread — using them.

"When I come back to an event to pick up my restrooms, I'm often told they were the hit of the party," recounts Ballback, 44, who established his Woodlands, Texas-based business in January 2005. "Sometimes event sponsors tell me that people take pictures of the units.

"In fact, one time I arrived after a wedding at someone's home, and a few guests were still there. They asked me to stand in front of one of the restrooms so they could take a picture. It was pretty cool."

Inside one of Ballback's luxury units, Fleet Series models from PolyJohn Enterprises Corp., you'll find a sink, foot pumps for no-hands operation of the sink and flushing toilet, quality toilet paper and hand towels, air freshener, anti-bacterial soap, hand lotion, purse hooks, large mirrors, a tap light or motion-detector light, flowers, a sewing kit, hairspray, a shoe shine cloth and sponge, baby powder, makeup remover, a comb and nail file, and more.

This emphasis on luxurious amenities differentiates Ballback's business from other Houston-area restroom contractors, who tend to con-



Frank Ballback loads a PolyJohn Applause hand-wash station onto his Nissan UD 1400 service truck using an Anthony Lift Gate. (Photos by John Everett and Frank Ballback)

Profile

First Class Rentals
The Woodlands, Texas

Owner: Frank Ballback

Years in business: 2

Employees: 1

Service area: 150-mile radius around Houston

Specialties: Portable restrooms for special events (corporate and weddings)

Affiliations: South Montgomery County Woodlands Chamber of Commerce

Web site: www.firstclassrentals.net



Ballback loads a PolyJohn Fleet Series restroom onto the Nissan truck from Best Enterprises using a Deal Associates Mongo Mover dolly.

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While standing in line to use a portable restroom at a large outdoor party, Ballback saw a young girl exit the unit in tears, followed by her frustrated father. He immediately knew exactly why she was crying. And it struck him that there had to be a better alternative to dirty, foul-smelling restrooms that people dread to use.

The next day, as Ballback thumbed through a business magazine, he ran across an article about a woman who rented luxury portable restrooms. That was enough to convince him the planets were aligned for a stab at the portable restroom business.

“I never thought I’d get into the restroom business — it wasn’t at all on my radar,” he recalls. “I was looking at everything from a mailbox business to fast-food franchises. If not for that crying girl and reading about that woman’s restroom business, I never would’ve considered it.”

Ballback started out by browsing the Internet to examine what other restroom vendors were doing. Then he attended a trade show where he learned more by talking to vendors.

Next, he sold his tool franchise and used the proceeds as seed money to buy his first units — 11 PolyJohn Fleet Series restrooms. He also traded in his tool truck as a down payment on a 2004 Nissan UD flatbed truck, built out by Best Enterprises Inc. with a stainless-steel tank (300-gallon waste/110-gallon freshwater).

SLOW GOING AT FIRST

Eyeing the special event market, Ballback began to promote his new business by renting booth space at several Houston-area bridal shows. He also put in a lot of footwork, knocking on the doors of special-event planners.

“It was hard at first, trying to get them to look past stereotypes of portable restrooms and realize I was presenting something a lot nicer than what they were used to,” Ballback notes. “But once they use your service and like what you do, you get more and

more referrals.”

Ballback received a huge promotional break — the kind of free, widespread publicity a small business owner dreams of — during the summer of 2005.

“It started when I called the *Houston Chronicle* to get the name of an event coordinator they’d written about,” Ballback recalls. “I got transferred several times, and the fourth guy I spoke with was the business editor.”

As the editor listened to Ballback explain his unique take on the portable restroom business, he realized it would make a great feature story. A nice



Ballback aims to please female users with his special events restrooms, including flowers, sewing kit, hairspray, top-quality paper products, baby powder, makeup remover and a nail file, among other items, in each unit.

centrate on construction business. The VIP focus enables Ballback, a former automotive tools dealer, to slowly ratchet his way into a profitable special-events market niche.

TWIST OF FATE

Ironically enough, none of this would’ve happened if Ballback himself hadn’t attended a special event in downtown Houston during Super Bowl festivities in February 2004. At the time, he was mulling a career change after almost 20 years of self-employment in the automotive industry, including a nine-year stint as the owner of a Snap-on Tools franchise.



Two of three First Class Rentals restroom trailers are these ACSI Advantage Plus series trailers. First Class Rentals recently added a Wells Cargo Comfort Elite III to the inventory.



Ballback moves a unit into place for delivery using the Nissan UD truck (above). At left, Ballback is shown restocking units in one of his storage lockers. He can stow 18 to 20 units each in two 12- by 45-foot storage units.



First Class Rentals provided flushing units at an Oprah Winfrey Angel Network and Habitat for Humanity event for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Fifty families received free homes in the Houston area.

write-up soon followed in a Sunday edition of the major daily newspaper.

But that's not all. When the wife of a reporter for a local television station saw the story, she told her husband.

"Two weeks later, I was on television," Ballback marvels (you can read the story and see the interview at www.firstclassrentals.net). "If I had tried to get a story like that published or aired, it never would've happened."

The publicity paid dividends when a banker saw

the television interview and liked the business concept so much that she helped Ballback secure a Small Business Administration loan. That came in handy for initial startup costs, which were higher than usual because the special events units he bought were about twice the cost of a standard restroom.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Despite the great free publicity, building a business from scratch has been anything but easy. Ballback says he definitely learned a lot from mistakes he made along the way, both big and small.

For instance, he figured event business would be better during the summer, but quickly realized that special events are rarely held outdoors during that time because of the scorching Texas heat. On the other end of the scale, he learned that the small amenities he put on shelves inside the restrooms tended to fall off, and even end up in the toilet. So he started putting them in baskets.

Networking with other restroom operators has been invaluable, especially at trade shows, including the Pumper & Cleaner Environmental Expo International.

"When you work by yourself, it's so helpful to talk to others to see how you can tweak your own operations and improve efficiency and profitability," he says. "For instance, someone told me they always bring an extra unit to an event, wrapped in plastic wrap. That way, if a customer needs another rest-

room, you don't have to make an extra trip out to the jobsite on a weekend. If the unit still is sealed come pickup time, there's no charge."

Because event business is inconsistent at times, Ballback realized he needed some standard units for construction work and the like to supplement his main business, which is 95 percent special-event oriented.

"I was missing out on jobs by not owning lower-end restrooms, so I diversified my product offerings so I could accept smaller jobs, like soccer tournaments or fun runs," he explains. "That helps me get through the slow periods."

First Class Rentals currently owns 26 flushable and non-flushable Fleet restrooms from PolyJohn; two Comfort Inn wheelchair-accessible units from PolyJohn; 18 PJN3 PolyJohn restrooms; four portable PolyJohn showers; four Applause and 10 Bravo hand-washing sink stations from PolyJohn; two

School of Experience Teaches Marketing 101

Frank Ballback didn't know much about marketing when he opened First Class Rentals in 2005. But he learned a lot in a short time.

One piece of advice he'd like to pass along to other budding entrepreneurs: Embrace the Internet. A Web site allows a business to easily show potential customers its products and capabilities in ways that brochures and pamphlets can't, Ballback notes.

For example, Ballback's Web site includes photos of his restroom product line. As an added benefit, potential customers can click on each photo to see interior views.

He also recommends incorporating specific words and phrases in the Web site's editorial copy that are pertinent to the industry, such as "portable restrooms." That way, your business is more likely to appear when potential customers use search engines to find vendors.

"Above all, I use the KISS philosophy: Keep It Simple, Stupid. You want a Web site that's useful, but not all cluttered up," he explains.

Ballback also uses the Yellow Pages to advertise his business; because of the large area he serves, his business appears in eight different books. He hopes to reduce that to one or two in the near future.

Along with renting a booth at area bridal shows, Ballback increases his company's profile with a direct-mail campaign centered on cost-effective postcards.

"Whenever I get a new product, like portable showers, I sent out postcards to everyone I know in event planning, just to show them the improvements I'm making," he says.

As his business grows, so does his advertising budget. Last year he spent about \$9,000 on advertising, about double what he spent the year before.

However, he doesn't believe in plastering his business name all over the outside of his rental units. Instead, he affixes a small sticker on the inside of the units' doors and places business cards inside each unit.

"My clients don't need somebody's billboard at their event," he says. "I want to be more inconspicuous. Actually, it's a good selling point. People like the fact that I'm not using their event to promote myself."

"MY CLIENTS DON'T NEED SOMEBODY'S BILLBOARD AT THEIR EVENT. I WANT TO BE MORE INCONSPICUOUS. ACTUALLY, IT'S A GOOD SELLING POINT. PEOPLE LIKE THE FACT THAT I'M NOT USING THEIR EVENT TO PROMOTE MYSELF."

Frank Ballback



Models at a fashion show in Houston utilize First Class Rentals restrooms (top and bottom). The upscale fashion show featured Naomi Campbell as the lead model and front row seats commanded \$2,500. The restrooms in these photos were located backstage.





Flushing units and an Applause sink from PolyJohn were set up with screening and ready to serve wedding guests at a ranch in Cat Springs, Texas.



A 12-foot ACSI Comfort Station restroom trailer is set up for partygoers at a beach house in Crystal Beach, Texas.

Advantage Plus restroom trailers from Advanced Containment Systems Inc.; one Wells Cargo Elite III restroom trailer, a 2006 Dodge 3500 Ram crew cab pickup with four-wheel drive, outfitted by Crescent Tank Manufacturing with a 350-gallon waste tank; its original flatbed service truck and a 12-foot landscape trailer.

WORKING ALONE

While it's often nice to fly solo, working alone also has its disadvantages, says Ballback, particularly because it takes much longer to set up the amenity-filled restrooms, he notes.

"It takes me about an hour to set up each unit. Once you get it set up and leveled, there's still a lot to do. If I have a job that requires all of my units, that's

about three days of setup time and one day to break it all down and get it back into storage. I definitely earn my money on those jobs."

Nonetheless, Ballback continues to expand his business. He's considering an air-conditioned restroom to further diversify his product line; it retails for around \$3,000. Purchasing more luxury units is just one way of ensuring his business lives up to its name, Ballback says.

"If you name your business First Class Rentals, you want people at special events to say, 'Wow, this is nice — those were the cleanest restrooms I ever saw.' I've had customers watch me set up a job and ask why I go through it all. I just tell them that if I take shortcuts, then I'm not going to be what I claim to be: first class.

"My business is good, but it's nowhere near where I want it to be," he adds. "But I'm a big believer in the saying, 'If it is to be, it's up to me.' If I'm patient and hang in there, I know this is going to work." ■

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