



Simi Bhachu, owner of VIP Bin Cleaning USA's master franchise in California, sprays out a bin with a pressurized hose. The cleaning unit contains 66 gallons of water, enough to sanitize 150 bins.

Photos: Courtesy, Simi Bhachu

From mean to clean

Bin scrubbers find that there's a good business in gunk

By Vince Bond Jr.
WRN reporter

Open a phonebook in England and you'll find several companies that specialize in cleaning trash bins.

However, it's a different story when you cross the Atlantic Ocean, said Simi Bhachu, owner of VIP Bin Cleaning USA's master franchise in the San Francisco Bay area.

VIP Bin Cleaning launched in the United Kingdom in 1997 and has since opened franchises around the world in places such as South Africa, Belgium, Australia and Canada.

Bhachu, an England native who moved to the U.S. in 2004, estimates that trash can cleaning has been a common practice in the U.K. for at least two decades.

But once she began operations in 2007, Bhachu found that her customers in Pleasanton and Dublin, Calif., had to be educated on the service's benefits.

"It's a concept that's not well established in the U.S.," she said.

Instead of people cleaning their own cans and potentially contaminating groundwater supplies by dumping gallons of tainted water on the curb, people can call companies like VIP Bin Cleaning that use four times less water during cleanup while ensuring that none of the wastewater ends up in storm drains.

Trash cans are placed in VIP's mobile cleaning units where they are sprayed with a pressurized hose and deodorized with a cherry-scented solution that retains its smell for a month.

The mobile units use 66 gallons of water, which is good for cleaning around 150 bins.

Bhachu said mechanisms in the units retain the water for reuse throughout a shift. The water is bought from a local water treatment facility and returned to the plant at the end of each work day.

"I think it will gain traction here," Bhachu said. "We have so many inquiries all over the country. People see it as a good business model."

A pleasant smelling bin is especially important for those who live in places where containers have to be kept in



Before and after: A filthy bin, left, comes out spotless, right, after a VIP Bin Cleaning USA session. The company uses a cherry-scented solution that retains its pleasant smell for about a month. It is useful for residents who keep their bins in a garage.

garages, she said.

In the Bay Area, Bhachu said residents are required to separate their food scraps for composting, so conditions in those bins can be gross at times.

"You can imagine the state of [compost bins] after a couple of weeks," said Bhachu, who recommends at least one cleaning per month. "Once we service the can, if you keep on top of it and have the service done regularly, you eliminate the whole problem."

Bhachu said there isn't a particular age demographic that utilizes VIP's services with customers ranging from young couples with children to the elderly. The company thrives with townhouses, apartments, single-family homes and schools.

"We were thinking the higher-end homes would be our target markets, but that's not true at all," she said.

Cleaning garbage bins with bleach and dumping the remnants in a storm drain may be convenient, but it isn't best option for the environment, said Jay Price, who runs a Mr. Clean-A-Can franchise in Nicholasville, Ky.

That wastewater is home to bacteria and chemicals that could endanger groundwater sources, Price said.

Mr. Clean-A-Can is a national operation with seven franchises in Kentucky, California and Florida.

"We try to do a simple service and do a good job at it," Price said. "It's going good. The hardest part is spreading the news about why we do what we do."

The cans are placed in the back of the company's hydraulic-assisted trucks, which do the majority of the work.

The trucks utilize an on-board cleaning device that disinfects the bins while retaining leftover water in a filtration system. A biodegradable chemical also

keeps the water clean so it can be reused.

Technicians then spray the bins with a deodorizer that kills odor-emitting enzymes.

The wastewater is later disposed at a wastewater treatment facility, Price said.

In addition to residential cleanings, the company also sanitizes 95-gallon trash carts for waste haulers such as Waste Management Inc., Republic Services Inc. and Veolia Environmental Services.

"All of that gunk out of the trash bins is being put into the street and running back into the creek," he said. "Conservatively, there are a couple billion gallons of water going down into the storm drains contaminated with chemicals and nasty bacteria."

While VIP Bin Cleaning and Mr. Clean-A-Can spread the bin-cleaning culture, Shelia Herrera of Clean Can Technology in Farmington, N.M. is looking to get in on the action by selling her 2007 patent of a fully-automated cleaning truck.

The truck, which will have a fully-contained water filter for wastewater reuse, can lift a bin while sanitizing its interior and exterior in a process that will take less than one minute.

To craft a design, Herrera partnered with NASA's Space Alliance Technology Outreach Program, Sandia National Laboratory, Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Manufacturing Extension Partnership.

She said a prototype should be built within the next six to eight months.

"I have a team of engineers and we're working on our funding right now with some investors," Herrera said. "We have a great design." ■

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Escaped convict found knee-deep at WM facility

For nearly six hours, escaped convict Cesar Sanchez, 37, was on the run in the Chicago suburbs of Lockport, Joliet and Rockdale. Little did he know that as far as law enforcement was concerned, he was about to become No. 1 in the No. 2 business.

Returning to Illinois' notorious Stateville Correctional Center following a court appearance in Bridgeview, Sanchez apparently determined he had taken enough crap from the Illinois Department of Corrections and kicked open the back door of the transport van.

Sanchez jumped from the moving vehicle, apparently injuring his leg but nonetheless running with a limp. According to corrections officials, he was handcuffed and wearing a state-issued jumpsuit when he escaped.

A police source says Sanchez quickly located a Berryman Transfer & Storage Co. moving van in the area and was able to climb up on the cab and hide behind the wind foil, riding nearly 15 miles from Lockport through Joliet and into Rockdale.

Berryman Transfer is located on Moen Avenue next to a large Waste Management Inc. facility. After the driver parked his truck, he thought he heard a noise, looked out the back window and saw a foot sticking out and then saw someone running away. Surveillance video captured the image of a man on Waste Management's property.

I was following the reports of the escape because of the location. I have friends and relatives who would be showing up for work at two of the hauling companies located on that street in just a few hours. I was, quite frankly, worried for their safety. This is the same area where Dutch, the beloved yard dog, had been killed a few months ago and where a hauling company burned to the ground as a result of arson.

Melanie, a Cook County Sheriff's bloodhound, picked up Sanchez's scent in the yard where Waste Management stored its portable toilets. Initially, police were baffled and unable to locate him.

An alert officer from the Department of Corrections Apprehension Unit noticed a footprint in the yard that matched the type of boot issued to inmates. Soon after a Chicago-Cook County helicopter's infrared heat sensor identified an image from one of the more than 300 toilets.

Officers checked under the toilet seat and saw movement in the chemical tank, which had not been pumped out or cleaned. Arresting officers joked that Sanchez was literally knee-deep in doo-doo.

It took a little convincing to "flush" Sanchez out, according to Rockdale Chief Robert Dykstra. And there were no volunteers forthcoming to go in after him!

One officer at the scene laughed about the hard-fought discussion that followed over who would transport Sanchez. Would the fire department hose him off? Should we walk him down to the local car wash?

In the end (no pun intended), corrections officials transported Sanchez to the hospital for a medical evaluation. I presume the van received a thorough cleansing! It's a sh**y job but someone has to 'doo' it!

Sanchez is serving seven years for burglary, drug possession and misuse of credit cards. He previously served time for robbery, vehicle theft and aggravated battery.

The long and short of it, folks: Law enforcement has the same job we do.

It's just that the trash they collect doesn't wait patiently at the curb. ■



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