



Drain Visions technicians (from left) Mike Beausil and J.R. Moore and owner Frank Canora interact during a job in Blackwood, N.J. The company's specialties include pipeline inspection. (Photography by Kevin Cook)



Members of the Drain Visions team with a company truck: From left, owner Frank Canora, and team members J.R. Moore, Mike Beausil, and Joe Capone.

Doubling Down

Drain Visions LLC pursues fast growth with high energy, an adaptable business plan, and quality service as a subcontractor to local plumbers

By **Scottie Dayton**

PROFILE

DRAIN VISIONS LLC, BLACKWOOD, N.J.

- OWNER:** Frank Canora
- FOUNDED:** 1999
- EMPLOYEES:** 4
- SERVICE AREA:** 150-mile radius
- SPECIALTIES:** Drain line locating, inspection, and jetting
- AFFILIATIONS:** New Jersey Water Environmental Federation



Video inspection cameras are beautiful things to Frank Canora. His belief in pipe inspections led him to open Drain Visions LLC in Blackwood, N.J., in 1999.

At first, Canora rented a friend's equipment, working as a subcontractor while building his own commercial customer base. With bulldog tenacity, Canora built a reputation as the go-to man for plumbing and mechanical contractors to call when all else failed. Today, they still provide 65 percent of his work.

On the way, with frequent modifications to his business plan, Canora doubled the company's revenue each year for seven years. Then he made his biggest adjustment, stepping out of the service van, hiring people, and focusing on job estimates and sales.

Drain Visions is growing at a steady 10 percent now, but Canora knows it can do better. He plans an aggressive, face-to-face marketing campaign and envisions branching into underground leak detection and hiring two more employees within five years.

Laying groundwork

Much of Drain Visions' work is identifying and cleaning drain line stoppages or marking the location and depth of blockages for excavation. Its service area encompasses the southern halves of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and customers include engineering firms, plumbing and mechanical contractors, and environmental service companies. Commercial accounts contribute 70 to 80 percent of revenue.

It took time for Canora to gain the plumbers' trust. "They're very cautious in who they allow around their work, because they're afraid of losing customers," he says. "My solution was not to do plumbing, and to present my company as a resource for contractors to accommodate customers' needs."

The strategy worked so well that even contractors who clean and inspect some drain lines on their own call Drain Visions when they are overloaded or their equipment is down. "I never took any customers from anybody, and I never burned any bridges," says Canora. "That philosophy paid off, because 90 percent of the time, I'm the subcontractor these guys call for help." They also refer Drain Visions to their customers.

The business got a boost when the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) mandated time-of-sale inspections of industrial sites. Where chemicals are used, engineers must know if drains are broken, soil is contaminated, or pipes discharge into watersheds. They turn to Drain Visions for answers.



Drain Visions technicians J.R. Moore and Mike Beausil retrieve an inspection camera after a job in Blackwood, N.J.

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Systems. With that equipment, he did subcontract work for Bommer and two other plumbing companies.

For almost seven years, Canora's only help was Bob Kull, a part-timer who worked two weeks per month. His presence freed Canora to focus on sales.

Unusual jobs

The two often found themselves in interesting situations where other contractors wanted no part of a problem. One job involved a homeowner with a malfunctioning toilet: Flushing it sucked the water out of the sink basin and bathtub traps, allowing sewer gas into the bathroom. Various plumbers tried everything in the book without success.

"We were one of the only companies that would go to the house," says Canora. Finding nothing wrong with the lateral or inside lines, the men turned

"We use the sonde in the camera head for 90 percent of our locating work, but sometimes dye tests are necessary," says Canora. "We do whatever it takes to make the DEP happy." Inspections are stored on DVD and are accompanied by written reports that include the depth of pipes and the best excavation points.

Company toolbox

The company's two technicians, J.R. Moore and Mike Beausil, use mini and full-size SeeSnake Plus cameras and locators from RIDGID, or a custom-built inspection trailer from CUES Inc., equipped with an OZII pan-and-tilt camera on a tracked transporter for mainline inspections and a K2 portable video inspection system. The men create detailed reports on CUES Granite XP asset inspection and decision support software.

Canora wishes he had that equipment when he opened Drain Visions. "My business plan was to specialize in video pipe inspections, locating, and jetting, but I needed a customer base before any bank would give me a loan," he says. He turned to his former employer, Wayne Bommer of W.R. Bommer Plumbing in Laurel Springs, N.J., renting his mini and standard Scooter Video Inspection

ALL WORK AND NO PLAY

Frank Canora, confident that he could start his own drain line inspection and locating business, threw himself into running Drain Visions in Blackwood, N.J. For seven years, he worked nonstop with only a part-time helper, who came two weeks per month.

"I let the business run me," says Canora. "The relentless cycle left me exhausted, and that opened the door to depression. In 2006, I reached the point where I had to make a life-changing decision or lose everything I had worked for. I wasn't me anymore. I had lost myself."

Part of the solution was moving the office out of his house, enabling him to leave the work behind at the end of the day. Now he warns other business owners about the

hazards of doing paperwork every night instead of strengthening their marriages and watching their children grow.

"Sure, we have to work hard and face reality, but we must balance that effort with time to enjoy life, because it passes quickly," says Canora. "Sometimes business will take that time from you in a heartbeat."

Canora found part of the balance he seeks in working out at a gym and training in the martial arts twice a week for an hour before starting his day. "I don't move very well, but the training has really improved my focus and concentration," he says.

"Just doing a couple little things for myself has paid big dividends. I'm making up for some of the time I've lost."

to the roof, but not before they got a 40-foot ladder to reach it. Kull climbed up and lowered the push camera down the vent stack. Canora followed its progress on the monitor until he saw a large plastic drink bottle lodged cross-ways in the pipe.

"I yelled the discovery to Bob, and he said to send up some rope," says Canora. "He made a lasso and pulled out the bottle. It had been cutting off the vent every time the toilet flushed." The bottle apparently fell in during roof repairs.

Locating often involves retrieval of objects with cable equipment or metal pushrods with spiral or C-hook retrievers on the end. Technicians often cut or bend the hooks to help snag or push the object. "Contractors drop levels, screw-drivers, tape measures, and other hand tools down the drain," says Canora. "We even find lengths of replacement pipe, and once a can of plastic pipe primer."

Municipal income

Winter brings its own special locating jobs, as snowplow drivers knock brass cleanout caps down catch basins. "Once in the drain, they act like flappers and clog it," says Canora. "Depending on where we find the caps in the line, we pull them back to a manhole or jet them to the downstream manhole for retrieval. They're a real nuisance."

Drain Visions also subcontracts at health care facilities, and one of those provided the company's longest job. A hospital had constant backups and sewer flies in the cafeteria and some kitchen areas.

The plumbing contractor assumed the culprit was a drain handling 80 percent of the hospital's sewage. It ran underground 400 feet to a lift station, then the waste was pumped up to a manhole. The plumber's preventive maintenance had little effect, so the hospital engineering and operations supervisor called Drain Visions.

"I wound up not wanting to go to work or liking what I was doing, and the company stagnated. This was bad, because I love nothing better than to operate the camera all day."

Frank Canora

"It was a very hard line to inspect and clean because our only access was the pump station," says Canora. "Besides that, a lot of flow comes out of hospitals, and the pipe was half full of water." Packed grease and sewage prevented a thorough inspection.

The supervisor insisted that Canora set up a bypass to the manhole in case the pump station failed. Canora also needed permission from the township to discharge into the manhole. "Bob Kull and I worked from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. when the flow was lowest," says Canora. "We battled one week to clean the line and eliminate the sewer flies multiplying down there. However, we like those jobs because of the challenge."

Assorted challenges often caused Canora to modify his business plan. He initially marketed to real estate agents and homebuyers, but the state has no time-of-sale law. "Everyone viewed onsite system inspections as just another hurdle impeding settlement," he says. "So I put, 'Buying A Home? Request An Inspection' on my trucks. It's beginning to pay off, as we've seen an increase in those calls."

Life's detours

When he couldn't stay busy doing video pipe inspections and locating, Canora branched into emergency, 24/7 drain cleaning and hired an answering service for after-hours calls. "I always looked at what I could offer using the equipment I had," he says.

Seeing the need for even more expansion, he decided to rejuvenate onsite systems by pressure-washing cesspools and drainfield distribution lines using an O'Brien Manufacturing, a Div. of Hi-Vac Corporation, trailer-mounted 3518-SC hydrojetter.

The next natural transition was locating buried septic tanks. "These are the ones that haven't been pumped in 40 years and are hiding under garages, decks, driveways, and toolsheds," he says. Drain Visions also locates buried curb traps,



J.R. Moore conducts and observes a mainline inspection with a K2 portable inspection system from CUES Inc.

cleanouts, and manholes at apartment complexes and strip malls.

By working during the day and doing paperwork at night, Canora kept the company growing fast, but the relentless cycle took its toll, especially after Kull died. "I wound up not wanting to go to work or liking what I was doing, and the company stagnated," he says. "This was bad, because I love nothing better than to operate the camera all day."

More contact

Canora decided to devote 60 to 70 percent of his time to meeting customers and prospects face to face. He hired Joe Capone as operations manager, Robin Holbrook as his part-time assistant, and Moore and Beausil as technicians.

"It's better for me now than it has ever been," says Canora. "When I'm selling, Joe sends text messages saying where J.R. and Mike are and what jobs they're doing. That way, I can help them when necessary. It's working out very well, we're all happy, and the company is moving forward again."

Besides personal visits, Canora reaches commercial contractors by advertising in USA Blue Book, exhibiting at plumbing and mechanical expositions, attending contractor networking events, and hosting an occasional meeting of the local association of the New Jersey State League of Master Plumbers. He also started marketing to municipalities and their engineering firms.

Canora was 35 when he opened Drain Visions, but he wouldn't attempt it now at 45. "It takes too many years to build the business foundation," he says. "I built the company on honesty, reliability and, most of all, team players who don't give up. They always try to find the most economical solution, not the easiest and the fastest."

In the next five years, Canora hopes to hire two more employees and expand into underground leak locating and onsite system inspections, while maintaining the team-player ethic. "I think it's very important that everybody wants to come to work, enjoys what they do, and goes home safe," he says. "For myself, I'm not an office person. I don't want to grow so big that I can't jump in the truck whenever my guys need help." ■

MORE INFO :

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Scooter Video Inspection Systems

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