



Cover  
Story

# NUTS for TRUCKS

Showy yellow rigs are Illinois contractor Cary Zeschke's best advertising

By Ken Wysocky

Cary Zeschke, owner of Zeschke Septic Cleaning, preps his septic service trucks for 15 parades and a variety of regional truck shows every year. (Photos by B. Corbin)

Cary Zeschke's best advertising tools are yellow — but they're not the local phone books in Bloomington, Ill. The owner of Zeschke Septic Cleaning says he gets the most bang for his marketing buck from his two gleaming vacuum trucks: a 1995 Peterbilt 379 with a 3,600-gallon aluminum tank and a 1996 Kenworth T800 with a 2,800-gallon steel tank.

"Those two trucks are traveling billboards," says Zeschke, whose company's services center on cleaning septic tanks and grease traps. "Every time I come back from a job, I intentionally drive down the main business streets in Bloomington-Normal, just to display the trucks.

"They're always clean, which is important. Clean trucks tell people we'll leave a job-

site as clean or cleaner than when we started. And they tell people we can respond when they need us, because it doesn't look like our trucks will break down.

"I've always had a thing about image," he adds. "It says a lot about any business, but especially in the septic industry. When you pull up in a nice-looking septic truck, it provides a whole different image about what we do. It says a lot about your professionalism and service."

Zeschke's been passionate about trucks most of his life. Before he became a pumper, he drove a semi-truck on local routes for 20 years. And when he decided in 2002 to become a septic contractor, he saw his first issue of *Pumper* and decided that one day he'd own a show truck fit for the "Classy

Truck" feature — a vehicle that looked as great as the service it provided.

"If you talk to a truck driver, you'll hear that they take a lot of pride in driving something that makes people turn their heads," Zeschke says, explaining why he's so into his rigs. "Even when I drove someone else's truck, I was always washing it and adding chrome and lights with my own money — jazzing it up with little extra bells and whistles."

## KEPT TRADING UP

Zeschke's first truck, purchased in 2002 when he started his business, was not "Classy Truck" material: a 1976 Ford F-600 with a 1,000-gallon steel tank. A couple months later, he bought out a retiring pumper. The deal included a 1995 GMC TopKick with a



## Profile

### Zeschke Septic Cleaning LLC Bloomington, Ill.

**Owner:** Cary Zeschke  
**Founded:** 2002  
**Employees:** 4  
**Service area:** 60-mile radius of Bloomington  
**Primary services:** Septic pumping and grease trap service  
**Web site:**  
[www.zeschkesepticcleaning.com](http://www.zeschkesepticcleaning.com)



1,500-gallon steel tank, as well as a customer list of about 40 or so septic and grease-trap accounts. So he sold the older Ford and kept the GMC.

In 2004, Zeschke really got serious about trucks when he bought the 1996 Kenworth, built out by LMT Inc. For starters, he painted it yellow to make it stand out.

"You can hardly not look at it when you see it driving down the road," he says. "I wanted something that would get noticed. You see a lot of white trucks and black trucks, but not yellow trucks."

He bought the truck for more pragmatic, efficiency reasons, however; a larger tank translated into more service calls between disposal runs.

"When I bought it, a 2,800-gallon tank was the biggest one around, and everyone kept asking how I get around in it," he says. "I'd just

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**Cary Zeschke**

park it on the street and put out 200 feet of hose if I needed to. It was great doing two or three tanks at a pop. Before, I was making trips left and right; do a tank, go dump, do another tank, go dump, and so on."

About 40 percent of Zeschke's sales volume comes from pumping septic tanks, 30 percent stems from cleaning grease traps and the rest is generated by miscellaneous commercial and residential work.

To dispose of septic waste, Zeschke relies heavily on lime-stabilized land-application on eight acres of rented farmland, an arrangement that saves him money. He's limited to 5,000 gallons per acre per month, and must keep meticulous records. He uses only the Kenworth truck and he land-applies waste as long as weather allows.

When land-application isn't feasible, Zeschke says he's lucky enough to have 10 different waste-disposal sites scattered around at municipalities within a 30-mile radius. "There's usually one within 10 miles of all our accounts," he says.

#### **DREAM MACHINE**

Zeschke decked out the Kenworth as much as finances permitted, but he was sav-

ing the best for last. After six to eight months of searching, he hit the truck-lover's jackpot in February 2009 with what would become his dream vehicle: the 1995 Peterbilt chassis, which features an extended hood. The truck used to be a wrecker, but Zeschke saw potential that Mid-State Tank Co. Inc. helped him realize by installing a 3,600-gallon aluminum tank.

First he painted the truck yellow, similar to the Kenworth's color scheme, but with green and silver metallic flakes that sparkle and glitter. Next, a local upholstery shop customized the interior by recovering the seats, interior door panels and headliner. "They basically ripped out the whole interior and put in a new one," Zeschke says.

Red LED lights mounted on the ceiling and under the dashboard give the cab a soft, red glow at night. For exterior show, Zeschke added red ground-effect lights, one mounted under each cab door and one on each side of the truck, between the cab and the tank.

On the rear, diamond-plate aluminum panels run from the hose trays to the bumper, rendering the underside of the truck invisible. On the front, Zeschke had a local machine shop use a plasma cutter to cut out the name



Zeschke Septic Cleaning is a family affair, with (from left) wife Terri, Cary, and children Cody and Chelsea keeping the business humming along.





Cary Zeschke inspects a residential pumping job while son Cody handles the hose.

"Zeschke Septic" in the front bumper, which is backlit for night viewing. He further tricked out the truck with eight-inch chrome exhaust pipes.

"I'm also putting LED lights on it: marker lights, headlights and taillights," he adds. "Eventually, it will have amber-colored LED strip lights running all the way down both sides of the truck, under the hose trays."

Zeschke shows off the Peterbilt at about 15

parades a year, which he says provides great, free advertising. "Sometimes I get calls before I even get home from a parade," he notes. He takes the Peterbilt to truck shows, too, which also generates business leads.

#### CUSTOMER EDUCATION

While good-looking, distinctive vehicles help Zeschke differentiate his business, he says customer service and education also do the trick.

"We give our customers a septic-care booklet that tells them what to do and what not to do. Every so often, we take things out and add new information," he explains.

Part of the education includes a thorough evaluation of a customer's septic system. Zeschke refuses to disclose a price until he gets essential information from a customer: things like how many people live in the house,

Zeschke did a complete renovation on the interior of his prized 1995 Peterbilt 379, which he enters in regional truck shows.



Preparing for a grease trap service job, Zeschke attaches a hose to the aluminum tank on his 1995 Peterbilt service rig.

when the tank was last cleaned, how big the tank is and the like.

"Then I explain what they get from us: an evaluation to see what's in the tank in terms of solids — see if there's anything that's in there that shouldn't be. When we're through, we give customers a refrigerator magnet with our name and telephone number on it, plus the year they're due for the next cleaning. We also send out reminder cards every year after April 15, because that's when the weight restrictions on local roads end."

Zeschke uses a Sludge Judge to evaluate septic tanks. He says it's invaluable when he can physically show a customer what's in their septic tank and show why it needs cleaning.

Typically, the extra value provided by the educational booklet often takes customer cost objections off the table, even though Zeschke is in the middle to upper range of local cleaning rates. If not, he usually doesn't budge on price. "I tell them this is my price, and if you



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**Cary Zeschke**



Cary Zeschke cleans a grease trap. Grease trap service has grown into about 30 percent of the company's business in eight years.

want someone cheaper, call somebody cheaper," he says.

#### **SATISFYING WORK**

Zeschke is glad he made the jump to self-employment, noting he thoroughly enjoys the gratification and satisfaction of watching a business grow.

"It was a big jump, quitting a full-time job to be self-employed," he says. "At first, you have your doubts about what you've gotten into. But I've always wanted to own my own business — be a little more independent. I wanted to see if I could make it work, and have a little more control over my future."

Zeschke says his wife, Terri, who handles administrative and office details; son Cody, 20, a full-time route driver; and daughter Chelsea, 22, who drives truck part-time; are

instrumental to his success.

"We've probably grown four times bigger during the last eight years, with an average increase in gross sales of about 20 to 25 percent a year," he says. "We clean grease traps at about 150 restaurants, up from 50 or so when we first started out. I never dreamed I'd get to the point where we're running two trucks at the same time."

At some point, Zeschke concedes he'll have to decide how much growth is too much. Work already demands 12- and 14-hour days, and it's getting harder and harder to handle all the customer telephone calls, service calls and scheduling.

## **Larger Truck, Networking is Boon to Pumping Business**

Cary Zeschke's two vacuum trucks do more than just look great. The bright-yellow trucks with Zeschke Septic Cleaning emblazoned on the sides also helped him forge a valuable partnership, as well as offer an innovative customer-referral program.

About three years ago, Zeschke developed a business relationship with the owner of a local sewer- and drain-cleaning company, Mike Olson. It all started when Olson called Zeschke for help, and Olson came away impressed with Zeschke's promptness — and his sparkling-clean, well-maintained trucks. Now they rent a shop together and call on each other's services when needed.

The relationship allows both businessmen to expand their service offerings to customers without expensive capital investments in new equipment, Zeschke says.

"We run businesses the same way, with fair pricing and treating customers the way they should be treated," Zeschke says. "We've helped each other grow considerably. I'd say his business adds about another 5 percent to my gross sales."

To build his residential septic business base, Zeschke offers a good-neighbor discount program, in which he gives a customer a \$15 credit if they can get a neighbor to get their tank serviced on the same day. "Otherwise, you go out and clean a tank, and a week later, one of the neighbors calls you to come out and do theirs," he explains. "It's worth passing that \$15 bucks on to the initial caller."

The program is much more viable since the company bought a 1995 Peterbilt 370 and outfitted it with a 3,600-gallon aluminum tank. "We started hitting this program really hard this year because of our 3,600-gallon truck," he adds. "It's definitely increasing our business."

Zeschke also hosts a booth at local home shows, where he ups the ante of the good-neighbor discount: Any customer who signs up for a tank cleaning gets \$15 off, plus another \$10 if they get a neighbor to schedule a cleaning on the same day — and that neighbor also gets \$10 off their cleaning. At one show last year, Zeschke says 25 people took advantage of the offer; this year, 35 people signed up.

A network of seven or so local septic-system installers also plays a huge role in Zeschke's business. He "inherited" most of the installers because they worked with the owner of the company Zeschke bought shortly after starting his business. And he's added a couple more installers to the network since then.

"Whenever they've got a failed system, they call me to pump it out before they fix it or abandon it," he says. "I, in turn, refer system replacements to them where it makes sense geographically. It's been a substantial business relationship in terms of my growth."

On the other hand, business expansion would require buying another truck. And that would undoubtedly suit this truck-lover just fine. ■

#### **MORE INFO:**

**L.M.T. Inc.**  
800/545-0174  
[www.tanksandpumps.com](http://www.tanksandpumps.com)

**Mid-State Tank Co. Inc.**  
800/722-8384  
[www.midstatetank.com](http://www.midstatetank.com)