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## Zoom-ing Forward

Custom trucks propel business for a Philadelphia contractor

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# ZOOM-ING FORWARD

**An innovative, one-stop approach to mechanical and waterjet pipe cleaning creates the success formula for a Philadelphia contractor**

By Lynn Tilton



Zoom technician Chris Friel locates an underground sewer line using a Radiodetection receiver. Behind him is one of the company's fully equipped and well-stocked service trucks.

Zoom Sewer & Drain Service has enjoyed steady growth since its founding a decade ago in Philadelphia, Pa. But the business really took off when brothers Jim and Jason Criniti decided that their service technicians should be able to handle any job without having to call for extra help, or return to home base for more equipment or materials.

Custom-designed waterjet trucks, also equipped with mechanical cleaning equipment, inspection cameras, locators and other gear, enable technicians to provide one-stop drain and pipe-cleaning service. Zoom has successfully combined residential and small commercial drain and pipe cleaning with trenchless sewer repairs, delivered by separate work crews, and with vehicles fully equipped for their purpose.

Waterjet cleaning is a key component of the business, according to Jim Criniti, president and general manager. “We have six, truck-mounted US Jetting 3010 jetters, each with 200 gallons capacity and delivering 3,000 psi at 10 gpm,” he says. “We bought our first trailer-mounted jet unit six years ago, but we didn’t ask for help in developing the trucks until three and a half years ago.”

## Getting an edge

The brothers contacted Nick Woodhead at US Jetting to help them design what they call a “super sewer truck.” The basic design is a cab-over, diesel-powered unit with 14-foot Hackney body. The box has space for everything a technician may need during a call, and the short turning radius provides easier access to back yards and alleys in crowded urban areas.

“When we developed the truck, there weren’t many people putting a sewer jet into a truck,” says Jim. “About the same time, the plumbing industry started developing super service trucks, loaded with everything so that technicians didn’t

have to leave the jobsite.

“We tried to apply the same principle with our jetting and trenchless repair work. Our jetting and total business has doubled as a direct result of being able to provide our customers with a one-stop drain cleaning service. No longer do our technicians have to drive up to 25 miles back to the shop for another piece of equipment, or for supplies they need for a repair.”

Zoom covers five counties in the Philadelphia area, and its service technicians handle 30 to 35 calls on any given day. “Countless times we’re called out to do a standard drain cleaning where we also have to use our jetters to clear the drains of grease, roots, dirt and any other kind of debris,” says Jim. “Once they’re cleaned, then we camera the line to assess the thoroughness of cleaning and the possible need for repairs.

“A few years ago we had just one roofer jet and one camera. But we wanted one for each service technician, so they would not have to schedule another piece of equipment, but handle the problem right then and there.”

## Finding a partner

What Zoom wanted didn’t exist, so Jim and Jason did the next logical thing: They asked US Jetting to design a unit specifically for their needs. “With all the other equipment we wanted on the truck, they had just 4 feet by 6 feet at the front next to the cab to work with,” says Jim. “So they built a special rollup door on the passenger side for easy access to

## PROFILE

### ZOOM SEWER & DRAIN SERVICE INC. PHILADELPHIA, PA.

OWNERS:	Jim and Jason Criniti
SERVICE AREA:	Metro Philadelphia
CUSTOMERS:	16,000
EMPLOYEES:	16 to 18
SPECIALTIES:	Drain and pipe cleaning, trenchless repairs, general plumbing repairs
FLEET:	10 service trucks
AFFILIATIONS:	Plumbing, Heating and Cooling Contractors Association
WEB SITE:	www.zoomplumbing.com



the 300-foot hose.

The door design is similar to what firefighters use on fire engines. A lone technician can lift the door, grab the nozzle and hose and begin jetting almost immediately. "All he needs to do is insert the nozzle into the cleanout and pull the trigger," says Jim.

The jettors also have foot-pedal control, which comes in handy when the hose has to go into the basement. "The technician can operate the jet from inside the basement, rather than keep running up and down stairs," says Jim. "The foot pedal alone reduces the time to clean a blockage by 30 percent. It also makes it easier on the technician's knees.

"We believe in supplying our technicians with the best in equipment. We do a lot of research, looking at the most progressive competing companies to see what they're using. We also go to the Pumper & Cleaner Expo in Nashville and talk to a lot of people. The show is our biggest source of equipment ideas."

Jim observes that Zoom has always been the first in its area to buy new equipment, especially for jetting and trenchless repairs. New equipment means the Zoom team spends less time repairing machines and more time taking care of customers.

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**Jim Criniti**

#### Equipment lineup

Each jetter truck carries a complete line of standard drain cleaning equipment, including small, medium and large drum machines from Spartan Tool LLC, sectional cable machines from Electric Eel Manufacturing Co., RIDGID SeeSnake color cameras, locators and metal detectors.

"Trenchless repair equipment is on a separate truck," says Jim. "About 20 percent of our business is trenchless repairs. We have two, two-man crews to provide quick turnaround time. We use TRIC Tools pipe-bursting units, and we are a licensed installer for Nu Flow lining systems."

Smaller trenchless repair jobs can be done in a single day, while larger jobs may take three to five days. "We did a pipe-burst job underneath a swimming



Technician Chris Friel uses a RIDGID SeeSnake camera to inspect a sewer line for defects.

pool at a country club from underneath the pool to the manhole," says Jim.

"The traditional way would have required tearing up the pool, and it would have taken two to three months to restore the pool to use. This was in the spring, and the repair would have ruined the year for the membership. Instead, we were able to dig one access pit next to the pool and pipe-burst a 5-inch polyethylene pipe 120 feet from the pit to the manhole."

The crew was on the premises for two and a half days. "The customer was ecstatic about the entire process," says Jim. "They didn't have to excavate the pool and lose revenue by having to close it for the summer. It cut down on the anxiety. Now they have a brand-new pipe, and they won't have to worry about it for another 100 years."

#### Out with the old

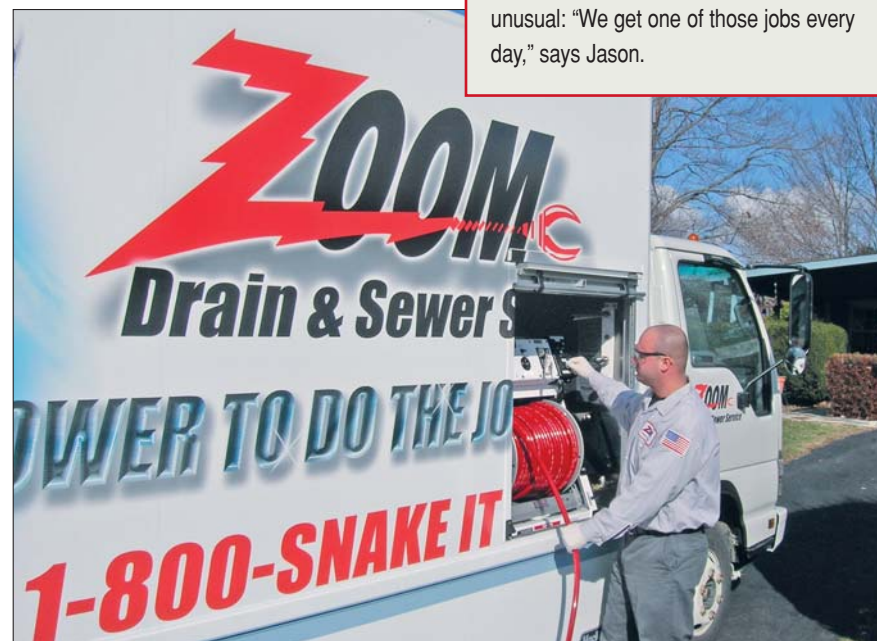
Because Philadelphia has one of the oldest sewer systems in the nation, pipe bursting and cured-in-place pipe lining are high-potential lines of business. Zoom did a lining job for an oil company on an outside fresh-air line for a building where the firm tests engines.

"They had a 16-foot pipe imbedded in one or two feet of concrete," says Jim. "It went from the floor of the engine test facility down into a fresh-air room. Pieces of the pipe were beginning to flake, and they didn't want engines to ingest any

of those metal pieces, so we relined that 6-inch pipe, which took just one day.

"There, the challenge was to do it right the first time," says Jim. "Had there been some kind of problem, we would have had to break the concrete. Because we did it right, they were enthused and said they probably would have additional

**A customized waterjetter from US Jetting allows a technician to pull up next to a clogged drain and clean the pipe without mess and hassle.**



## A Daily Occurrence

When waterjetting is a major portion of your work, you get a lot of trouble calls, says Jason Criniti of Zoom Sewer & Drain.

"A homeowner called us to do a job in rural Montgomery County. He had raw sewage throughout the basement, and a lot of big maple trees in the front yard. We knew what we were up against: roots in the sewer system."

The technicians cabled out the line for 85 feet to get drainage. Then they ran a camera through to show the homeowner why competitors' attempts to solve the problem had failed. This allowed the customer to witness how bad the problem was. "It also showed that an electric snake doesn't remove all the roots," says Jason.

Zoom used a high-pressure waterjetter with a Warthog nozzle in coordination with a camera to clean all 25 pipe sections, one by one, from the beginning of the intrusion to the sewer main. "We were able to show the customer we had cut 90 percent of the roots," says Jason. "Then we treated the line with RootX. At that point he had the next best thing to a brand-new line without excavating.

"He was blown away that we had given him his options, showed him first-hand the amount of roots in the line, and verified for him that we had removed virtually all the roots. It took just three hours. He was extremely pleased. It cost him a little more money than just snaking, but was a lot more effective long-term, and the line treatment also assures that this repair will last."

For Zoom, this project was not unusual: "We get one of those jobs every day," says Jason.

Chris Friel and dispatcher Janice Gray discuss information for Chris' next job. The firm uses JaRay software to store customer information and for dispatching.



lining jobs for us.”

To keep up with their diverse and growing business, the brothers know they need to find and keep conscientious technicians. A former Air Force recruiter, Jim says, “Our recruiting process mostly comes by word-of-mouth. Other technicians who have training in the industry apply.” New hires are placed on 90 days probation. When they prove they are

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**Jim Criniti**

ready to work solo, they are assigned to a service truck.

“We also have excellent benefits, including a full complement of health insurance, dental and vision, as well as a 401k,” says Jim. “We haven’t lost anyone because of the desire to start a business of his own. We strive to have a friendly atmosphere, including annual Christmas parties for them and everyone in their households.”

### **Up to the challenge**

Even with ideal equipment and ideal technicians, there are challenges. “We’re geared toward jetting, so winter can hamper productivity, especially after a major snowfall,” says Jim. “We definitely prepare ourselves for that. All our service trucks have heaters in the back to keep the jet units from freezing. In winter, we keep them on all the time so the back of the truck stays above freezing. We have a lot of restaurant customers, and keeping everything warm enough helps get the grease going. We’re able to provide the

same level of jetting in winter that we do during summer.”

Collecting for work is another concern. A steady customer base makes that easier, as does instant communication between technicians and the office. Jim estimates that 70 percent of calls are C.O.D.

“We also have a full software system for dispatching, and have GPS units on the service trucks,” says Jim. “This helps especially when dispatching for emergencies.” Zoom doesn’t use GPS to watch for unauthorized vehicle use or excessive speed, but to make dispatching more efficient. Technician calls for backup are rare — perhaps one in 200 service calls, says Jim. “We set up these trucks so they are one-man service vehicles,” he says.

### **Still getting better**

Even as Zoom continues to expand, Jim and Jason are seeking more ways to improve. “We’re concentrating on getting more customers in our geographical area and would like to expand into some of the neighboring metropolitan areas,” says Jim.

“More than half our new service calls come from people who have used us before. We’re heavily into Yellow Pages advertising, and we have a company in California that designs high-impact ads. They’ve proven much more successful than self-designed ads.”

Zoom is also focusing on improving its software to better track customers. “We have a fair number of preventive maintenance contracts with restaurants and apartments, and 90 percent of those contracts call for jetting,” says Jim. “Maintenance contracts make up about 25 percent of our jetting work.

“We have our technicians offer maintenance contracts to customers. After all, the main reason we purchased all this jetting equipment was to provide better service. Indications are that purpose has been fulfilled — and then some. ■

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