

# Brand Names in Seattle

**Multiple acquisitions of quality companies give Fischer Plumbing a broad base of drain and pipeline maintenance services**

**By Robert Bond**

**F**ischer Plumbing in Seattle, Wash., employs nearly 50 people and owns 40 service vans. But don't expect to see 40 trucks running around the city carrying that company name.

Fischer Plumbing has grown by acquiring small, high-quality companies that serve well-defined niches in the residential, commercial and industrial sectors of the plumbing and pipeline maintenance industry.

Each of the acquired companies — there are eight in all — still operates with its own name, advertising and brand identity, but under the Fischer Plumbing corporate umbrella. The acquisitions helped Fischer Plumbing grow quickly beyond its traditional specialty in drain and sewer cleaning.

## Building on a name

Daryl Miller bought Fischer Plumbing in 1996 after a friend told him it might be for sale. Although not familiar with the industry, Daryl had a broad business background, and a masters degree in business. He was also a certified public accountant. Seeing an opportunity and a challenge, he decided to go for it. His friend, Bruce Robertson, a plumber by trade, came on board as an equity partner. Daryl directs the venture as CEO.

Fischer Plumbing had owned a solid

reputation for drain and sewer cleaning in the Seattle area since the 1970s. When Daryl acquired the business, it had seven employees and a service fleet of four panel trucks. If you look at the fleet today, you will see the names of seven plumbing and sewer and drain cleaning companies, and one offering heating and air conditioning services. Besides Fischer Plumbing itself, the companies are:

- Alligator Sewer and Drain.
- Ballard Plumbing.
- Village Plumbing.
- Acme Plumbing.
- Better Plumbing.
- Gene Johnson Eastside Plumbing.
- AAA Heating.

## Filling the niches

"Fischer Plumbing is all one corporation," says Daryl. "But from the beginning I had a vision. This industry is very fragmented. It's populated by small organizations that have all struggled with high overhead and overlapping administration. What I wanted to do was to build the finest service company in this city. I wanted to do that by putting together the best of smaller companies under a cohesive management and organization.

"What I've done is acquire eight different companies. Each one was very good in its own niche or original facet of the industry. They worked in niches that



**Above: Members of the Fischer Plumbing team. Inset photo: Daryl Miller, owner.**



had to do with the segment of the business the owner liked the best. Each company had for years built its own company personality, loyalties and approach to the marketplace.

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ership and administration. It's all one corporation under Fischer Plumbing — with, if you will, different brand names."

## Owners stay on

In acquiring companies, Daryl prefers that the previous owner/operators stay on board and continue to manage their former firms. In most cases, they have done so.



**Technician Don Banyai works with a Harben water jetter.**

P R O F I L E	
<b>Fischer Plumbing, Seattle, Wash.</b>	
<b>OWNERS:</b>	<b>Daryl Miller, Bruce Robertson</b>
<b>YEARS IN BUSINESS:</b>	<b>7 (purchased a company in business since the 1970s)</b>
<b>SPECIALTIES:</b>	<b>Drain and sewer cleaning; underground repairs and installation</b>
<b>EMPLOYEES:</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>FLEET:</b>	<b>40 service vehicles</b>
<b>WEB SITE:</b>	<b>www.fischerplumbing.com</b>



***"This is a very human business. I believe that technical people work best for a company they believe cares about them. I don't believe in presenting a model for the guys of working for a corporate monolith, with a lot of rigid rules, to where they might feel they are being treated as robots."***

**Daryl Miller**



A technician with the Underground Division of Fischer Plumbing works on the site of an apartment building on a hillside in Seattle.

"They were creators of their businesses, and a guy in this business just doesn't walk away from it," Daryl says. "He may want to slow down. He may want a different kind of life. But he just doesn't want to go away. I feel they add a lot of value to the business, and they have all that experience to offer.

"In concise theory, they enjoy getting rid of the duties they didn't enjoy as an owner. The first love of most of them is their particular technical segment. Now they can take care of the things they liked, and I can take care of the things they didn't like. That's why the combination works so well."

In addition, Fisher Plumbing has established an Underground Utilities Division to take care of projects requiring specialized underground pipeline system investigation, repairs and installations. Underground estimator Rich Sitek says his division interacts with all the groups in the company to conduct television inspection, pipeline rehab, and new installation. The division also proposes separately on other work.

### **Close relationships**

"My department works closely with all groups of the company," says Rich. "If they have a problem getting things opened up, we'll send in a TV camera and take over from there. We do work on sewer laterals and mains and have done pipe installations up to 30 inches in diameter."

Besides having four TV cameras (three are RIDGID/Kollmann systems), they maintain three mini-excavators that can dig to a depth of ten feet. For deeper work, they rent equipment. Four customized service rigs and two dump trucks round out the heavy-duty equipment. Last year, the company added pipe bursting, buying a system from Pipe Genie Manufacturing. The company also operates two trailer-mounted waterjetters, one each from Harben Inc. and Spartan

Tool, LLC. All drain cleaning vehicles are equipped with winches to load and off-load heavier sewer cleaning machines.

All Fischer companies operate from offices and a yard in western Seattle. Daryl estimates that 80 percent of the business is residential; the balance is small commercial and industrial.

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Yellow Pages, radio, and other advertising provide telephone numbers to customers that are dedicated to lines for each of the brand names. When a customer calls on particular line, dispatchers answer with the proper brand name, then send the appropriate service crew and truck.

In urgent calls, and when the crews for a certain brand are tied up on other jobs, dispatchers send one of the other brands. If a customer calls to question the appearance of a truck from a company other than the one they called, the call taker simply explains the family relationship among the businesses. "They understand and usually say, 'OK, come on in and let's get the work done.'" says Daryl.

### **Short meetings**

Daryl generally takes an informal approach to management. "I don't like to

## **Swimming In Lake Washington**

Sewer and drain contractors face many routine jobs, but also some difficult and unusual challenges. Rich Sitek, manager of the Underground Utilities Division at Fischer Plumbing in Seattle, recalls a project that required some imagination.

"I had to have our guys wear scuba gear for this one," says Rich. The job involved a large residence on the shore of Lake Washington where a back-up had taken place in a 6-inch lateral, causing a reported \$50,000 damage. The home was just down the beach from the residence of Microsoft Corporation founder Bill Gates.

"Tracing the line with a locator, we found it ran away from the house directly into the lake, where there was a two foot seawall," Rich explains. "Our Radiodetection locator works well under water, and we found the line connected with the utility's 12-inch mainline 100 feet from the house, offshore under two feet of water. Plus it was buried under two feet of sand and dirt. The utility mainline ran offshore parallel to the shoreline."

After jetting the line, Rich ran a camera through. It showed that the connection tee at the mainline had broken and collapsed, blocking the lines. "We decided to build a half-moon-shaped coffer dam out from shore into the lake around the lines," says Rich. "It took more than 1,000 sandbags. We then placed four 4-inch pumps to initially get the water out."

Rich used a small ditching machine for excavation and kept two of the pumps in operation to keep water out of the ditching around the pipes. The crew replaced the tee as well as a section of the lateral beyond the seawall. "My guys enjoy a challenge like this one," says Rich. "And I do, too."



Crew members get started placing sandbags for a coffer dam out into Lake Washington.



***“We are able to get the highest-skilled individuals working for us, as opposed to those who are more sales oriented and have lesser skills. We don’t have call-backs on our work. We can price T & M to be profitable and competitive, while looking to develop long-term relationships with customers. I’m not looking for the short term dollar.”***

**Daryl Miller**

waste peoples’ time in meetings,” he says. “But we have good communications. Meetings are short, but deliver good information. We do have regular seven o’clock meetings every morning with all group managers. They are the rainmakers and leaders in the company.



**Underground Division manager Rich Sitek shows a laptop computer and printer in his pickup. The system is being developed so that he can do on-site job estimates, and hand a copy immediately to customers.**

We go through what work was done yesterday, which jobs were finished, and which were not finished. We talk about where we are going to go today, and who is working for who. And this meeting only takes 15 to 20 minutes.

“We talk about every single individual in the company. We share information, and this cross-pollinates between groups. We have a couple of laughs and stories from the day before. This gets the day started crisply on a positive note.”

The meeting is held in a central glassed-in office. “When our guys are coming in for the day, they can see that their company has a plan for getting their act together for the day,” Daryl says. “This is a very human business. I believe that technical people work best for a company they believe cares about them. I don’t believe in presenting a model for the guys of working for a corporate monolith, with a lot of rigid rules, to where they might feel they are being treated as robots. They are human beings that have needs to feel skilled and appreciated. So I try to provide that.”

This extends even to customizing the truck of a technician who has proven his skills and character. “If that guy says he likes metal shelving in his truck, I’ll buy

metal shelving for him,” explains Daryl. “If he likes wood, I’ll see he gets wood shelving. I want them to drive around and say, ‘This is my truck. It’s set up the way I want it set up — not the way some corporation told me to do it.’

“I won’t put their billing numbers on the board, because I don’t want them to have the wrong incentives. I want them to feel that they are highly skilled individuals, going out and solving problems for people, and to feel pride in solving those problems. Profitability and strong financial results are a natural by-product emphasis.”

#### **Time and materials**

Daryl believes strongly in billing work on a time-and-material basis instead of on flat rates. “I swim against a lot of companies in this industry because many of them are not as job efficient, and therefore go to flat rate pricing to be more profitable and

survive,” he says.

“We are able to get the highest-skilled individuals working for us, as opposed to those who are more sales oriented and have lesser skills. We don’t have call-backs on our work. We can price T & M to be profitable and competitive, while looking to develop long-term relationships with customers. I’m not looking for the short term dollar.”

Since he acquired Fischer Plumbing, Daryl admits he has made mistakes — and has learned from them. The end result has been all positive. “What has taken place since inception has exceeded my expectations,” he says. “We have built a lot of momentum in taking this approach to the market and to our employees. It has created a lot of opportunities — from customers, from other acquisition candidates, and for drawing in highly skilled employees who take pride in the work they do.”

He believes a strong synergy and an upbeat culture are at work at Fischer Plumbing and its brands. “It is a synergy that is creating continuous internal growth from all groups,” he says. “But we will also continue to grow by acquisition.” ■

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