

2005 CLEAN WATER REPORT

Protecting The Public Health

By Kelly Faloon

How one plumber meshed water treatment services into his vision of the plumbing profession.

When Richard Berner attended his first Water Quality Association meeting in 2003, his intent was to learn more about water quality issues and products. What he gained from the seminars and roundtable discussions was so much more.

“I knew this was the answer to servicing customers’ needs on a much broader scale and even went to the heart of the plumbing code — the plumber is licensed to help protect the public health and safety of the water supply,” he says. “Water treatment and purification fit that bill.”

Berner’s company, Wheaton, Ill.-based Water Wërks, is a plumbing service and repair company that also provides water treatment services and equipment. A third-generation plumber, he worked in his father’s contracting business (Berner Plumbing, Heating & Electrical) in high school as well as college, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in industrial management. He worked as a production supervisor, environmental sales representative and independent consultant before receiving his journeyman’s plumbing license in 1998.

He worked with several large plumbing contractors in the Chicago area to “familiarize myself with the service/repair business,” Berner explains, before deciding to strike out on his own. His brothers had taken over his father’s business (now Berner Construction). Water Wërks (a tribute to his father and grandfather, who were of German heritage) became a reality in 2004, and offers plumbing services, water softening/filtration services and bottled water delivery.

Berner decided to become an authorized dealer in the western suburbs of Chicago for Aqua Systems, a manufacturer of water treatment products including water softeners, reverse osmosis systems, water coolers and bottled water.

“Customers seem to understand the link between plumbing and water quality as selling ‘bottled water,’” he says. “Water filtration equipment or softener replacement is a natural progression — just as if I suggested to look at other plumbing repairs as part of a whole-house plumbing inspection that we offer.

“In the plumbing service field, the average number of times that you visit a customer is once every three to four years. You have to constantly market for new business, encourage customer service agreements or rely on referrals. By offering these additional water quality products and services, it evens out the highs and lows in service plumbing and, most importantly, keeps your name in front of the customer either monthly, quarterly or biannually through maintenance of softeners, changing filters or delivering bottled water.”

Business Challenges

Berner overcame several challenges going the water treatment route, and one of those was dealing with his fellow plumbers. He says many of his plumber friends didn't see the value in attending WQA meetings or obtaining the extra certifications for installing water treatment equipment.

"I firmly believe that if you are going to purchase, specify or install any type of water treatment/purification equipment in the home, farm or business establishment, you have to take the time to learn about the basic technologies in order to apply the correct water-processing techniques," he explains. "You may need a year of water treatment training to really understand and sell the products, or work with someone who knows water treatment for six months. Many plumbers choose not to take the extra certifications needed to further their knowledge and/or value to their employer."

Berner is in the process of taking WQA's Certified Installer exam, one of four exams that WQA administers. He equates the water quality certification process to obtaining RPZ licensing and certification for backflow prevention devices, or maintaining a plumbing license. In addition, some states require water treatment equipment to be installed by a licensed professional; Illinois, for instance, requires a licensed plumber to install all reverse osmosis equipment, Berner notes.

Keeping up with water quality technology and products is just as important as keeping up with what's new in plumbing. A voracious reader, Berner subscribes to more than six different trade magazines. And his WQA membership allows him access to books, handbooks, guides and exams on topics from ethics and legal considerations to residential, commercial and light industrial water treatment and processing techniques.

Distribution was another challenge. Berner found that many of his plumbing distributors didn't carry water treatment equipment, or they had a basic line that was hidden behind their main lines of plumbing fixtures, or they weren't selling the latest treatment technology.

"Plumbing distributors' prices were not competitive when it came to selling water purification products, or the products had to be special-ordered with long lead times," he says. To find those products he needed, he had to find a new distribution channel. He now has about a half dozen new distributors in the water quality area.

Marketing On The Web

One of the first things Berner did "the minute I named my business" was look for a Web designer. He didn't want the typical plumber Web site — no wrenches or water drops, no van or truck displayed. He wanted something that could pull together the different parts of his business — plumbing and plumbing-related services, water softener and treatment equipment and bottled water delivery — into one Web site. He found two freelance Web designers who did all the layout and design, while Berner provided all the text.

He admits the site (<http://www.waterwerksforyou.com/>) is still a work-in-progress, but he has received feedback from customers (and friends!) that it is very customer-friendly. He can track his hits, and although he hasn't gotten as many as he had hoped after a substantial advertising and press-release

campaign, he has begun receiving some leads via e-mail through a bulk mailing that emphasized his Web site address.

One of the newest items on the site is the sign-up page for a quarterly e-mail newsletter. Topics include plumbing maintenance tips, seasonal priorities in plumbing and heating, information on bottled water vs. point-of-use filtered water, new products, discount coupons and his referral bonus program. Users can also request specific information about water softeners, reverse osmosis systems, water filters, bottled water, water coolers, backflow prevention systems and plumbing.

The site has a Water Facts page that explains reverse osmosis purification in the bottled drinking water product and how the body naturally uses R.O. water, as well as an information resource section which “answers” specific questions about water quality in the Chicago area, top priorities for plumbing systems, hot water problems and sump pump replacement.

Berner also has a Monthly Specials page that usually highlights one water treatment special and one plumbing special. (These same specials are highlighted on a flyer sent to customers’ and prospective customers’ homes.)

The bottom line is that the site includes a lot of information for Berner’s customers and potential customers, and gives them avenues — mailing address, phone, fax and e-mail — to contact him for more information or schedule a call.

Growth Opportunity

Berner’s business is small; he works with one other licensed plumber and a couple helpers. But in a year or two he intends to open up a storefront location as an Aqua Systems dealership where he can also market his plumbing services, giving him more “branding” opportunities.

“Plumbers have a distinct competitive advantage [to offering water conditioning/purification services] already, if they would only capitalize on it,” Berner explains. “A state license.” Proper licensing shows consumers that you’re a professional; why not advertise it? He says many plumbers don’t even have their licensing information on their trucks or business cards. Berner includes all his licensing and membership information on his Web site, and his plumbing license number appears on all his advertising, business cards and on his truck.

Professional plumbers are thought to be plumbing experts; why not water experts, too? Water is part of the job; it’s not such a far-fetched idea to add water treatment and purification services to your business. It’s a natural progression, don’t you think? If you go on a water heater call, for instance, and you see a lot of mineral and scale buildup, mention that soft water can increase the functionality and extend the life of any appliance that uses water — water heaters, dishwashers, washing machines, ice makers, even your kitchen and bathroom fixtures. If the customer’s water doesn’t taste right to him or her, mention point-of-use filtration or a whole-house purification/treatment system. Offer to conduct a free water test.

Some plumbers don't believe they need to add these services because they already have enough work. But doesn't every plumber have a slow period? Between December and April is usually a slow time for plumbers, Berner explains. It's the perfect time to add an extra service. And while heating and air-conditioning is one avenue a company can take to diversify, he says it's much easier to cross-train plumbers in water quality. And it's repeat business — changing filters, maintaining softeners, delivering water or salt.

For plumbers that do want to enter the water treatment field, Berner suggests joining the Water Quality Association as a first step. This ensures that plumbers will receive the correct education and certification needed, as well as providing networking with dealers, distributors, rep agencies and other contractor members (there are a few!).

"The water quality market hasn't peaked yet," Berner says. "It can be overwhelming in the beginning, but it can be very rewarding, knowing that you've diagnosed, installed and will maintain the equipment as only a plumber could!"

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