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## PRECISION IN THE FIELD

Training + Accountability = Success  
for Precision Plumbing Services



Owner Matt Morse worked long and hard on the design of his trucks. Customer perception of professionalism is an important aspect of Precision Plumbing Services and Kangarooter.





The Precision Plumbing Services and Kangarooter team.

# PRECISION IN THE FIELD

BY KATIE ROTELLA

I'm in Lombard, Ill. — not too far from my own home, actually — standing in the call-taking part of the new offices of Precision Plumbing Services. I watch as owner **Matt Morse** flips through the customer survey cards he's holding, his concentration so deep on the small stack he seems to forget I'm there. "We get about six of these sent back each day," he says.

Most of the cards I've seen so far (slyly from over his shoulder) have had excellent ratings; all satisfied customers willing to refer Precision's services to friends and family.

"See, this one had a lower rating," he points to a thumbs-down sign circled on the card. (The company has eliminated the guessing-game of knowing for sure if customers are happy by using a thumbs-up and thumbs-down image.)

Morse's brow furrows a bit as he reads the customer's comments: "Technician said he would arrive during a 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. window; didn't show until 5."

He taps the card and looks over at **Ed Stewart** and **Jackie Mercer**, his customer service representatives responsible for handling

Photos courtesy of Alan Klehr

PROPER TRAINING AND ACCOUNTABILITY HAVE  
MADE PRECISION PLUMBING SERVICES A SUCCESS.

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**Left: Head Dispatcher Jessica Stark helps man the phones, handling both Precision and Kangarooooter calls. Right: CSRs Ed Stewart and Jackie Mercer continue to contact customers. Follow-up calls are made with each job Precision completes.**

customer relations and scheduling.

Stewart nods his head in silent communication. Morse's smile returns, and he's ready to continue our interview.

While this one card's lower rating has concerned him — after all, Precision's tagline "Is Today Soon Enough?" is taken seriously — I've seen enough this day to know Morse has full confidence in his team, and Ed and Jackie will take care of any problem.

They will first look into the situation: Why was the technician late? What were the circumstances? Then they will contact this customer — and many others today through the course of their follow-up calls with each Precision customer. Their commitment to quality helps this blossoming plumbing company on its path to success.

Perhaps Precision's CSRs will offer a simple heartfelt apology to the unsatisfied customer. Perhaps they'll go a step further and mail a Lettuce Entertain You gift certificate for the customer to enjoy on the company's dime. Whatever. They will do what it takes to turn that customer's frown upside down, for customer service is No. 1 at Precision.

And the CSRs are fully empowered to fix any wrongs right over the phone. Why, you may ask, would an owner give such "power" to a CSR? One word:

accountability. At the heart of Precision is Morse's team of trained, consistent and dedicated employees who are held accountable and responsible for their actions. Each one knows the score and their goals, and each is committed to being on a winning team.

"I'm my own worst critic," Morse tells me. But he emphasizes that customer service affects everything. "If there's a price complaint, we skipped a step in explaining the value of our services. Maybe we pushed where we could have done some more pulling." At Precision, everything is presented to the customer first, and the technician is up-front with his services. All this establishes trust and builds value, and eventually return customers.

But let's back up a bit for a little company history and humble beginnings. It will probably sound familiar; Morse's journey started very much like any other plumbing business owner's. However, you'll find this story's ending has yet to be written, as Precision continues to work toward attaining the goals of its visionary leader.

**Can You Dig?** Fresh out of high school, Matt Morse was looking for something to do. Not too thrilled with the idea of college just yet, but still needing a job, he ended up working for a plumbing contractor in Wheaton, Ill.

"I remember the boss saying to me, 'Can you dig?' So that's what I did; I dug holes and ditches, all the while receiving plumbing training on the job." Morse recalls being fascinated with sewers. And this was before cameras and other technology. It was cable work, and it was dirty, and Morse loved it — a character trait that will aid him in the future in Precision's break-out Kangarooooter drain cleaning endeavor (more on that later).

Soon, after a stint in junior college and then away, Morse found he wasn't enjoying school. But the company he dug for eventually closed up shop. "He was a great guy," Morse says fondly of his former boss, "but not the best businessman."

As luck would have it, another older employee of the same company had tried his hand at his own business, too, but things hadn't turned out the way he'd planned. Both now faced unemployment.

Spurred on by a friend, who reminded Morse that he'd always said he wanted to start his own business, Morse and his older co-worker decided to open up Precision Plumbing again, starting with a single van and tools working out of a garage.

They soon had a growing client base, and in 1995 moved to office space



**Precision Training Manager Randy Drumhiller presides over the weekly operational and customer service meetings. The LEGO blocks are stacked to help the team visualize its performance for the quarter.**

in Wheaton — a commercially-zoned residence that shared space with a dog grooming business. That’s when they hired their first office person. From 1996 to 2000, during the housing boom, Precision completed new construction projects and some plumbing service with about a dozen other employees, including **Mike Borowski**, Precision’s operations and service manager, and Morse’s right hand.

However, Morse had a vision, and it didn’t include the new construction market.

“It was holding us back,” Morse says. His vision of growth, though, didn’t gel with his partner’s, and eventually Morse bought out his partner’s half of the business, got out of new construction, and focused 100 percent on plumbing service.

“It was scary being on my own, but exciting. I’ve always preferred doing things my way,” Matt states. The initial few years out of that market, though, took a toll. They did decent, but not great. Sales dropped, but the company held firm.

**Training Turnaround:** In 2000, after a smooth transition to new and bigger offices in a neighboring town, Morse began to work *on* his business instead of *in* it (though he tells me to this day he’s willing to jump in a truck and dig

a hole if needed). He joined Nexstar (then known as Contractors2000), and he overhauled the way he managed his company — employees, marketing, financial and customer relations.

“We did an about-face with employees,” Morse says. Since customer service had become priority No. 1, technician training was paramount. “You’re only as good as who’s running the job.”

In 2003, his service managers underwent **Al Levi’s Staffing Power!**

training program. In addition to that, he took full advantage of Nexstar’s programs and resources, and invited various business and training consultants to his office, including Nexstar’s **Jim Hamilton** and mentor **Matt Smith**.

“Matt Smith is a sales- and manager-training monster,” Morse laughs. “He is all about building trust and value with the customers and a strong advocate of training the managers to holding accountable.”

Levi helped Morse put together and implement Precision’s operating manuals, which allows the employees to fully understand the game they are playing, and ultimately adds a level of consistency to the way the company operates.

“There are a million great ideas out there,” says Levi. “But only about half get started and even less get completed.” With Levi’s Planning Power! training, Morse was able to focus on the top five priorities, and then work to get them implemented.

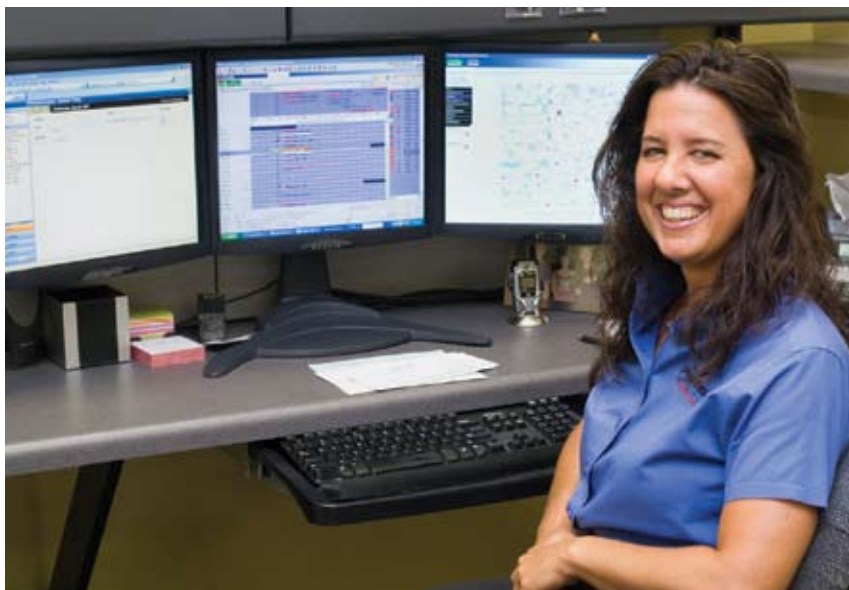
One of the priorities was developing its in-house training system, now headed by Precision Team Trainer **Randy Drumhiller**.

Levi’s Staffing Power! model comes in two forms: apprentice to junior tech training, and senior tech to field supervisor. The mission is to get the apprentices up to speed to become producing technicians, while the field supervisors are responsible for lead-



**Randy Drumhiller demonstrating to Plumbing Field Technician Dan Collins. Precision technicians practice their craft in-house rather than in a customer's home.**

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Jessica Stark sits in her dispatch headquarters. Office staff is kept in separate rooms from the technicians, to keep day-to-day operations running smoothly and on-time.

ing and supporting their team's sales, operational and technical standards.

Drumhiller's task is to work with the apprentices and develop a plan for a fully functional training center where the apprentices practice their craft in-house rather than in a customer's home.

"Randy will take a guy out of a truck if he needs to be retrained," Morse explains.

I saw Drumhiller in action firsthand earlier that day at the shop's weekly operational and customer service meeting held in Precision's training room in its newest digs in Lombard. He held court in front of 20 or so technicians and managers, where he reviewed any housekeeping concerns — from customer warranties, to truck stock and inventory, to semantics and the phrase "my pleasure" vs. "you're welcome" or "no problem."

"It's the little things we do that stand out to our audience," says Morse.

Then I watched as he let Precision's three field supervisors break out with their teams of five to six guys to discuss the sales reports and goals from the previous week. In true **Ellen Rohr** fashion, the employees treat their weekly goals as a game, where increased production from each team allows a corresponding number of colored LEGO blocks to build a tower of success for the quarter.

It is a visual representation of how each team has contributed to overall shop performance.

I asked Morse about the blocks and he explained the game: "The important number is not revenue, it's sold hours and close rate. I don't want the guys obsessed with the high-ticket jobs. If the sold hours are being satisfied, then so is the revenue needed to operate and grow the company. The higher number of close rates means we're not missing any opportunities with customers."

He quickly drew an equilateral triangle — all sides of equal length — on the paper in front of me. At each corner he wrote a word — Customer, Precision, Employee — with arrows moving counter-clockwise.

"When Precision takes care of its employees," he moved his pen, "they take care of our customers. The happy customers, in turn, take care of Precision," Morse completed the graphic.

So how does Precision take care of its employees? Not only do they receive the best pay and the best benefits around, as well as the advantages of a four-day workweek, Precision employees don't have to guess at how they're doing — they already *know*.

"The one thing I've learned is that employees don't want to feel like a number; they want to feel like family.

And they want recognition, appreciation and reward. We work very hard to maintain the culture here to retain the best people."

Through the company's goals and games, or "Dot Program," as it's labeled, each technician knows his score — and everyone else's, too. It is a visual performance indicator, which at a glance can identify who is and who is not hitting their billable hour minimums.

A red dot depicts falling short of the sold hour minimum, a black dot represents the minimum requirement was met, and gold and platinum stars indicate that billable hour minimums were greatly exceeded.

The teams "compete" in these games for group prizes decided by the winners (anything from White Sox tickets to a day at Six Flags).

From the game's written instructions: "The purpose is to recognize those that are hitting their goals, and implement coaching and accountability for those that aren't. Below monthly minimum billable hour standard 'Red Dots' display the need for the individual to seek coaching to improve their results."

The knowledge of where they stand in the company feeds the feeling of loyalty, and also personal accountability among the employees. This is especially important as a technician looks to his future with Precision, and how the company's standards affect his advancement from field technician on to management positions.

**New Endeavors:** However, all this success and achievement with Precision is not enough for Morse. He is the first to tell you that he is rarely satisfied with status quo. "I don't like to compare my company to other plumbing companies," he tells me, as we hedge on the subject of his competition. "I prefer to compare Precision's customer service to successful companies in *all* industries."

In the forefront of his continued vision is the fairly new Kangarooooter™ drain cleaning segment of the company.

"It is something I've always wanted to do," Morse says. From the first bite of the digging/sewer bug in his early years in the industry, he's wanted to take

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drain cleaning service to a whole new level. Getting to the heart of the matter, Morse confesses that “Precision” always felt like someone else’s company (since it was first started by his long-ago partner). To be able to start from scratch a whole new company — with its own name, own financials, own trucks, marketing and customers — the pull was too strong to ignore.

So once Precision was a well-oiled machine, with systems and services in place, Morse could finally devote time and effort into building his drain-cleaning “empire.”

Since February 2005, the trademarked Kangarooter segment has operated its own two trucks within the parameters of Precision Plumbing Services.

Morse has so far kept the financials and marketing budgets under one roof, but he’s hoping that will change.

“Precision will always remain the perceived ‘expert’ and ‘technical’ side of the plumbing business, but I wanted a separate name and look to Kangarooter that would make it stand out from the rest.”

In his research of this new endeavor, what he found was that customers would call Precision for plumbing service, and when a technician informed them that they did drain cleaning, too, the customers were surprised. “I didn’t know you did that,” most would say.

Morse acknowledges that the “stigma” of a sewer or roofer company is one that is perceived as separate from a “regular” fixture replacement or leaky-pipe plumbing company. This behavior of customers to mentally separate the two was encouraging to Morse. He had found a niche in which his professional, trained technicians could shine.

When drain-cleaning calls came in to Precision, he would send out a technician in the Kangarooter-wrapped truck. The customers barely noticed that the “Precision” name was not prominent on the vehicle. “They didn’t even flinch or bat an eyelash, as long as the technician represented himself as a professional, and the nuisance was handled,” Morse tells me.

“People either look to hire a plumber or a drain cleaner, rarely



The Precision Plumbing Services management team: (from left to right) Field Supervisor Tyler Diciolla; Jessica Stark; Service Operations Manager Mike Borowski; Randy Drumhiller; Field Supervisor Brett Hobson; Matt Morse; Office Manager Jennifer Uryasz; and Field Supervisor Gary Larsen.

thinking that the two could be one and the same,” Morse says. “So I’ve just run with the way people naturally think. Is it radical? Maybe. There are a lot of doubters out there when I tell them what I want to do with Kangarooter, but they can laugh all they want — I’m confident this is going to be huge.”

The bright orange of the Kangarooter trucks with the friendly and conscientious animal on them (notice the kangaroo has its shirt tucked into its pouch, and booties on its large feet) are hard to miss on the road. The logo was part of a well-thought-out collaboration between Morse, his designer ... and his daughter.

“She was very helpful, telling me [the kangaroo] looked too stern, or too goofy. We fiddled with it for a long time. But I think we’ve gotten it just right.”

There is now a stand-out, separate toll-free number for this segment (866-GO-KANGA), and Precision CSRs are trained to handle the calls. Its own Web site ([www.kangarooter.com](http://www.kangarooter.com)) and catchy radio jingle further separate it from Precision.

It offers “Service in Minutes, Not Days,” and Nu Flow sewer relining.

All the hard work seems to be paying off, as Morse informs me that call volume has increased each year the

trucks have been on the road.

“Having the two companies has produced the best margins for us,” he says.

**What’s Next?** Branching out is a logical next step for Matt Morse and his team, and Levi has confidence: “Matt has certainly grown up in the business, and is wonderful at creating a vision and making it happen.”

As Morse has provided the opportunities for his employees to grow within the company, opening up the second — or third — shop in his service area could be a breeze, because the operation manual is in place and his team knows what is expected of them.

Since Precision is right outside Chicago (“I don’t even want to think about *that* area yet,” he says), Morse will probably branch to the northern suburbs and possibly south. He’s also not discounting other *states*.

And what about Kangarooter? Will it be built to sell one day? Even Morse is not yet sure. “I’m always open-minded to exploring new opportunities. I know there are people watching what I’m doing with Kangarooter. Waiting to see if my model will work,” he says. “For now, franchising or selling that part of the business isn’t what I’m working toward. If I want to succeed, I need more immediate goals in mind.”

Spoken like a true entrepreneur. **PM**