

At ON DOODY, a Man's Gotta Doo What a Man's Gotta Doo

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Lee Bowling, owner of ON DOODY Pet Waste Removal Service, gives out a scratch-and-sniff business card that reads: "If this card smells better than your backyard, call me immediately!"

His promotional brochure reads, "Your POO-lution Solution."

When he gets a call on his cell phone, it rings ACDC's "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap."

When asked how he got into the business of picking up dog droppings from residential and commercial property, he gives his normal response, "I stepped into it."



DOODIFUL FRIEND: Lee Bowling, owner of On Doody Pet Waste Removal Service, pets his dog, Nickie, in his home office on a recent afternoon. -- PHOTO BY ZACHARY

"You have to have a sense of humor to do what I do," he said.

But as the 2006 Small Business Chamber's Emerging Business of the Year, ON DOODY is serious business.

Doo what?

ON DOODY gets calls from three types of potential customers: those who don't want to do it themselves, those who don't have time to do it and "wives who are tired of beating their husbands to get out there and do it," Bowling said.

"And it's almost always the wife that calls," he said.

In his home office, which is decked out in University of Tennessee memorabilia, hangs a street map of the Memphis area with colorful pins marking every ON DOODY yard. He is getting ready to insert pin number 181.

Bowling assigns his four subcontractors to certain areas of town, and they're out there on time, rain or shine. He recalls a day last winter when he got caught in a hail storm in a yard with no trees or shelter.

"I was about 10 seconds from emptying the bucket and putting it over my head," he said.

Though he cleans yards in Cordova every Friday, he spends most of his time marketing the business.

"Nine out of 10 people I tell what I do, they're amazed that somebody actually does that," he said.

Another job is educating the public about common misconceptions of dog waste.

"Dog waste is not fertilizer, unless your dog is on a vegetarian diet," he said.

Because of dogs' fecal bacteria, waste used as fertilizer for gardens can cause disease and contaminate water.

In the dumps

One of Bowling's greatest misfortunes became a blessing in disguise.

"I was working at (National Bank of Commerce) in their mortgage department as a loan officer. I had a great job, right at a six-figure income," he said. "But then we got bought out by SunTrust, and before I knew it I got laid off."

Stunned, Bowling got in his car and started driving to nowhere in particular.

"I didn't have anywhere to be, anywhere to go," he said. "I was thinking, 'What do I want to do?'"

Bowling came back from about a month-long trip through Mississippi, Tennessee and North Carolina and found out Drew Phillips, one of his high school acquaintances, wanted to sell ON DOODY.

Bowling bought the six-year-old company for a price between \$30,000 and \$50,000, he said, and quickly earned what he paid for it.

"How do you come home to your fiancée and say, 'I'm going from a six-figure job and I want to pick up dog poop for a living?'"

Just dropping by

Although the company was founded in 1999, Bowling took it over as sole proprietor in June 2005, and it grew by 70 percent in his first year, he said.

"I've always been very competitive. I hate to touch something and not succeed at it," he said. "I wanted to know I could do it, and I did."

A 1991 graduate of the University of Tennessee-Martin in business administration, he saw the company as a textbook scenario of how to turn a business into a success, he said.

"It was by no means failing, but I kind of felt like it was one of those case studies," he said. "It's not a gimmick business, and we take it seriously. But let's face it - we're picking up poop for a living."

He charges \$11 for one dog and \$3 for each additional dog for service once a week. The initial cleaning fee is \$35 for the first half hour and \$12.50 for each additional 15-minute increment.

Bowling admits that anybody could pick up after their own dog, but not everybody wants to do it.

"Having this service is a nicety," he said.

His goal is to increase his client base by 5.5 customers every month for the next 15 months, growing by 25 percent in 2007, he outlined in a business plan.

But he would like to be able to tell his wife, Kathy, who is IT manager for Mailroom Services Inc., she could quit working if she wants to, he said.

Doggie in the window

For someone whose life revolves around pets, Bowling is a relative newcomer to the canine craze.

"(Kathy) has always been a dog person. I never really was until I met her, and now I've gone overboard in the dog world," he said.

Bowling's bull mastiff, Nickie, is constantly by his side, especially now that he works from home.

"When I was in the corporate world, I'd pull into the garage after a hard day at work and there'd she be in the window," he said.

Jennifer Hill, who has been an ON DOODY customer for one year, said she was surprised someone performed the service, she said.

"I was thankful because I'm eight and a half months pregnant now, so that's the last thing I want to do," she said. "And the dogs love him."