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CZECH MATE!

By Ken Wysocky

The Johnny Servis sales team is shown with some of the company's marketing products and equipment in Tetin, Czech Republic. (Photos courtesy of Johnny Servis)

MOVING SWIFTLY ACROSS THE CHECKERBOARD OF EASTERN EUROPE, JOHNNY SERVIS IS TAKING HIGH PORTABLE SANITATION STANDARDS WHERE THEY'VE NEVER GONE BEFORE

Imagine what it would be like to do business with customers and employees in different countries who speak several different languages. Or to frequently cross

national borders and encounter different cultures and business practices. Or deal with workers who prefer to use only equipment sourced from their country. And to top it all off, start a new business from scratch and compete against a firmly entrenched industry giant.

It may sound daunting, but it's all in a day's work for Matthew Duras, owner and founder of Johnny Servis, a portable restroom company based in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. And by emphasizing great customer service, quality equipment and service diversity, Johnny Servis thrives in a competi-

tive, fast-moving and somewhat chaotic post-Communist world.

"It's very exciting to see all the changes," says the Canadian-born Duras, who started Johnny Servis in 1996, about six years after the Czech Republic (at the time, known as Czechoslovakia) became a democracy after almost 50 years of Communist rule. "I didn't plan to stay when I first arrived here. I figured I'd eventually go back to Canada and do something completely different. But it's so exciting ... you get the feeling that there's constant improvement. In a relatively short time, things have caught up (with the modern world).

"When I first started, for example, it was difficult to get a landline telephone connection," he recalls. "Now everyone has jumped to cell phones before land

lines were even well established. People here used to wait 15 years to get a landline under Communism. Now most people don't even use land lines here ... they've almost become obsolete before they had a chance to become common."

Equally dramatic changes occurred in Europe's portable restroom industry, where one of the market leaders is Germany-based TOI TOI Sanitarsysteme GmbH. Established in 1974, the company opened a Czech subsidiary in Prague in 1993.

"It's hard to imagine, I know, but until 1993, mobile restrooms didn't even exist here," Duras says. "Construction restrooms basically were a hole in the ground with a wooden shack built over it. So when portable restrooms arrived, the initial reaction was, 'Hey, there's

Johnny Servis Prague, Czech Republic

Owner: Matthew Duras
Years in business: 14
Employees: 95
Services: Portable sanitation and construction and event site services
Service area: Czech Republic, Slovakia Republic, Hungary, northern Romania and metropolitan Vienna, Austria
Associations: Georgia Onsite Wastewater Association, Portable Sanitation Association International
Website: www.johnnyservis.com





Above, units at a PGA Golf tournament in the Czech Republic. At left, workers assemble fencing at Children's Day in Slovakia.

“The combination of fencing and restrooms wasn’t common at first. But at a construction site, fences usually are the first thing to go up. Once you have that, you have a chance to sell customers something else — a restroom, or an office. It was a matter of listening to customers and what they want ... customers like it when one supplier can provide multiple services.”

Matthew Duras

a toilet — that’s great.’ But now people are much more conscious about what’s available, so now they want restrooms with sinks. Customer expectations change very quickly.”

RETURN TO THE HOMETLAND

Duras’ father was a Czech native who escaped from the country in 1951 and moved to Toronto, where Duras was born and earned an engineering degree. His father returned to his native country in 1992, when the government began returning personal

property to families — in his father’s case, a family farm. But Duras’ father eventually decided to go back to Canada, while Duras stayed to run the family farm.

Duras struggled to make the operation profitable, overwhelmed by the investments required to atone for years of neglect. So after a year, he began looking for a better business opportunity. He noticed construction was booming countrywide, and he had already started hauling waste for construction companies on the side, using the farm’s trucks. Simply expanding

that service made sense.

“I thought it was a good opportunity,” he says. “It was good timing, because construction was booming and there was only one competitor, TOI TOI, which was already in business here for several years — they had a little head start on us.”

Johnny Servis now owns about 7,000 PolyJohn Enterprises Corp. restrooms; about 40 restroom trailers, made by Germany-based Vario Trailer and Czech-based EuroWagon; 35 to 40 temporary office trailers (for construction sites and special events) made by the same two companies; 55 vacuum trucks, ranging from slide-in units with 400-liter (106-gallon) wastewater/150-liter (40-gallon) freshwater tanks to large vehi-

cles with 2,500 liter (660-gallon) wastewater/750-liter (198-gallon) freshwater tanks; and about 85 miles of temporary fencing in various heights and styles.

The smaller trucks that carry the slide-in units are made by Volkswagen and outfitted by IBOS s.r.o., a Czech company. The larger vacuum trucks consist of Mercedes-Benz chassis and IBOS tanks and pumping systems.

“In general, pumping trucks here are smaller than in the United States or Canada,” Duras explains. “They’re fuel efficient (roughly 20 miles per gallon). We also need smaller trucks because in old cities like Prague, the streets are very narrow, plus many streets have weight restrictions (because they’re still made of centuries-old cobblestone, for example). So we use the larger trucks mainly for rural runs or longer hauls.”

CHALLENGES ABOUND

Duras faced other obstacles early on, not the least of which was ethnic differences from country to country — or even region to region within countries. Getting people to work together was no small matter.

Duras also dealt with language barriers, although that issue now is easing somewhat as English becomes a more common language, especially among younger people. He also found people in different countries did business in different ways. For example, Hungarians like to spend a lot of time discussing and negotiating contracts, while Czechs prefer faster, direct negotiations.

He also discovered that acceptance of new products took



A Johnny Servis restroom and fencing placement at a major marathon in Prague.

“In 1996, it was completely new for someone to call a customer, thank them and then ask them if we could count on them again for business the next year. They really appreciated it then and appreciate it today.”

Matthew Duras



Service technician Marcel Hanzlik prepares to clean a restroom using a truck-mounted power washer.

Czech Businesses React to Rapid Technology Advances

The business climate in the Czech Republic and the United States are similar in one important way: Changes in technology come swiftly. So says Matthew Duras, the owner and founder of Johnny Servis, a portable restroom and on-site services company based in Prague, the Czech capital.

Take marketing, for instance. When Duras founded Johnny Servis in 1996, telephone book advertising was the preferred marketing method, just like in the United States.

“The books got thicker and thicker every year,” Duras recalls. “Then all of a sudden, it was the Internet. In about a two-year span during the early 2000s, telephone books died off and Internet took over. It was incredible.

“It totally surprised me because that jump occurred through wireless technology,” he continues. “Now, well over 50 percent of our sales leads come from the Internet. The Internet is an ongoing challenge for us – figuring out what works and what doesn’t work. We’re still learning.”

Duras also markets Johnny Servis by offering 25- to 50-percent discounts in exchange for free signage and listing Johnny Servis as a sponsor in programs for special events, like the Prague Marathon. But like his U.S. counterparts, he has to be careful about what events his company sponsors. His preference starts with charities.

“It’s effective for us. It provides a better light on the company if you’re listed as a sponsor for a charity,” he says. “But you can’t say yes to all of them, so you have to choose what you’re going to support, which isn’t always easy. We have a budget to meet, too.”

more time in some countries. For instance, in Slovakia, it took two years before customers became interested in plastic restrooms, he says. The company operates in the Czech Republic, Slovakia Republic, Hungary, northern Romania and metropolitan Vienna, Austria.

Duras wanted to set his company apart, concentrating on providing quality products and service, the latter of which he says was something new in the post-

Communist era.

“It was an easy sell for us,” he says. “We’ll not only rent you restrooms, but we’ll look after you, too, with personal contact and follow-up. At first, people would laugh at me when I’d start a phone call by asking how they are,” he says. “They’d say, ‘Why are you asking me that? No one ever asked me that for the last 50 years.’”

To effectively pursue that customer philosophy, Duras

created a sales team. Even though the country is relatively small, the business culture varies from region to region, so Duras recruited sales personnel from each service territory.

“In the beginning, it was expensive for us, but it paid off,” Duras says. “We now have a lot of smaller customers that have been with us for years. In 1996, it was completely new for someone to call a customer, thank them and then ask them if we could count on them again for business the next year. They really appreciated it then and appreciate it today.”

TOI TOI’s dominance in the market for large special events also yielded another unexpected bonus by forcing Duras to concentrate on smaller events. Those smaller events proved to be more profitable, as stiffer competition pushed down pricing for large concerts and sporting events.

The same thing happened with construction companies. At first, Duras couldn’t call on larger accounts because he couldn’t guarantee he’d have enough restrooms. So he went after small construc-



One of the company’s 40 compact restroom trailers. The units come from German-maker Vario Trailer and Czech-based EuroWagon.

tion companies instead. “In today’s economy, that’s a big advantage — lots of legs to stand on,” he says.

continued

Today, construction rentals represent about 65 percent of Johnny Servis' sales volume, with the balance stemming from events and other services, such as on-site fencing and temporary office trailers.

DIVERSITY AND AGILITY

Duras says the addition of new services also boosted Johnny Servis' growth. "Diversity has brought us closer to customers and made relationships stronger because we can offer a complete package," he says. "The combination of fencing and restrooms wasn't common at first. But at a construction site, fences usually are the first thing to go up.

"Once you have that, you have a chance to sell customers something else—a restroom, or an office," he continues. "It was a matter of listening to customers and what they want ...

customers like it when one supplier can provide multiple services."

It also helped that Johnny Servis was smaller and more nimble. For example, it's more difficult and expensive for big companies with large inventories to react when customer standards for products, such as restrooms with sinks, start to change. Duras addresses that issue by buying restrooms that

can easily be upgraded with sinks at a low cost.

More and more, government regulations are encouraging better sanitation standards. Before, customers would give Duras a budget and that would dictate how many restrooms they would order, regardless of how many workers were on a construction site or how many people were attending an

example) and how often they must be cleaned."

UNIFORMITY IS COMING

Duras says that with standardization brought on by the European Union, it's becoming easier to operate in different countries. That coincides nicely with his plans for further expansion into countries like Bulgaria and Romania.

Below, Johnny Servis luxury trailers are deployed at a polo tournament. Inset, the interior of a luxury trailer for a visit by Pope Benedict XVI to the Czech Republic.



Because of high fuel costs and tight European city streets, Johnny Servis employs small Volkswagen service vans. This one carries a 200-gallon waste, 50-gallon freshwater slide-in unit from Czech company IBOS. The photo at left shows the pump hose and pressure washer. The trucks get 20 mpg.

event.

"Now it's going in a direction we welcome," he says. "It's becoming more and more strict, both in the number of restrooms required, what kinds of restrooms (sinks and flush toilets, for

"We can't be too aggressive right now, but those countries remind me of the Czech Republic when we started," he says. "I'm very optimistic. We're always looking at new areas and new services. And the best part is I still love the business. I'm not at all tired of it." ■

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Technicians Ladia Vrsecky and Vaclav Mottle unload a Johnny Box Office unit for use at the Czech Open tennis tournament in Prague.

