

BY AMANDA C. KOOSER | SPECIAL TO NMBW

Garbage trucks get covered in trash remnants. School buses collect dirt. City government cars attract grime and dust.

Mike Schramski, co-owner of Aamerican Powerwash Equipment and Supplies in Albuquerque, helps all those vehicles become clean.

He sells and services pressure washing equipment for city and county governments, school districts and commercial customers, such as the city of Santa Fe, city of Gallup, Los Alamos Public Schools, Santa Fe Public Schools and Albuquerque heavy machinery supplier Road Machinery.

The name is not a typo. Schramski spelled it "Aamerican" for several reasons. It is a nod to his status as a U.S. Army veteran, and his preference for products that are made in the United States. He also chose the name in order to be listed first in the Yellow Pages phone directory.

"It's a help and it's a hindrance," he says.

He occasionally gets calls that are generated from his Yellow Pages listing, but sees the unusual spelling as a somewhat outdated tactic, now that the web has overtaken the phone book in popularity.

The pressure washers Schramski sells have little in common with those sold at home improvement stores. He doesn't deal with the residential side of the pressure washing business, since the big box retailers have that market well covered.

Aamerican Powerwash specializes in Hydro-Tek washers, heavy duty stainless steel systems that pump out thousands of pounds per square inch of water pressure to dislodge grime from vehicles and industrial equipment.

It's enough to cleanse the grease from the trucks used by American Waste Removal, an Albuquerque company that services restaurant grease traps. It's dirty work that requires powerful cleaning ability.

Schramski has an exclusive agreement with Hydro-Tek to sell the washers in New Mexico. He feels the product gives him an advantage over his competition. Those competitors include a small business, a manufacturer-owned dealership and a branch of a large Texas-based pressure washer retailer.

The Hydro-Tek units, which cost between \$5,000 and \$15,000, come in portable and stationary varieties. The stainless steel construction means maintenance is reduced and the washers last longer.

Those features appealed to Kelly Jarvies, manager at American Waste Removal.

"We hooked up with Mike because we had bought another brand and we were always repairing it. Mike's has been a lot better," Jarvies says.

The system has lasted nine years with

minor repairs. That's a healthy life span for a pressure washer. Greg Jarvies, president of American Waste Removal, wrote a glowing letter of reference that Schramski shares with potential customers.

Schramski launched Aamerican Powerwash in 1996. He previously worked as a bank vice president and then went into car sales.

When his work week reached 70 hours, he decided it was time to try something new. He learned the pressure washing industry while working for his uncle over several years.

"I thought I could do a better job, so I started my own business," Schramski

says.

His wife, Stella Schramski, joined the company as a co-owner. His brother gave the couple a \$10,000 loan to cover start-up costs. They were able to pay back the loan within two years.

The Schramskis have settled in comfortably as co-owners.

"We have pretty much learned how the other one works. It goes pretty smoothly 95 percent of the time," Stella says.

Mike Schramski handles sales and repairs, while Stella helps out with the books and certain customers. She also works part-time at clothing store Chico's.

"She speaks fluent Spanish. She makes



Pressure purge

Aamerican Powerwash keeps things clean

RANDY SENER | NMBW

Aamerican Powerwash Equipment and Supplies LLC co-owner Mike Schramski tests the performance of a pressure washer at the company's Albuquerque office.

Vital Stats:

Company: Aamerican Powerwash Equipment and Supplies LLC

Owners: Mike and Stella Schramski

Address: 9226 Admiral Lowell Place NE, Albuquerque 87111

Phone: (505) 821-6947

Website: apowerwash.us

Employees: two

Revenue: between \$200,000 and \$300,000 for 2010

Strategies:

1. Stock a quality product that your competitors don't have.
2. Take advantage of your partner's business skills.
3. Let your customers know if you are a special status business owner.

phone calls and talks to people that I can't talk to," Mike says.

The couple occasionally has heated discussions about the business, but makes sure to resolve any issues before bedtime. The only sticking point between the partners is Mike Schramski's messy desk.

"It drives me nuts, too," he says.

Aamerican Powerwash's first customers came from a mix of previous contacts and cold calls. Now, Schramski estimates that more than 90 percent of his customers come from referrals. He has tried mailings, advertising in the newspaper and billboards, but nothing worked as well as word-of-mouth. He occasionally gets queries from his website, and is looking into email marketing through the Constant Contact service. Schramski is also considering hiring a salesperson to bring in new customers.

The recession has been tricky for Aamerican Powerwash. One of the company's best years was 2009, but business started slowing significantly in late 2010, as customers put off upgrading equipment due to budgetary restraints.

"Our lifestyle has changed. We're not taking trips because of the business," Schramski says, adding that he started seeing signs of life again this spring.

"About a month ago, it started picking up. I'm really getting busy with service work, and have seven

to 10 machines that I have very good possibilities of selling," he says.

The company's 2010 revenue amounted to between \$200,000 and \$300,000. Schramski expects 2011 revenue will be around the same range.

Schramski promotes Aamerican Powerwash's status as a veteran-owned business. He is vice president of the New Mexico Veteran Business Advocates, an organization that provides resources for veteran-owned businesses in the state.

"I like to think that some people do business with me because I'm a veteran. I hope that they do business with me because of me and the product," he says.