

On their own terms

Northwest Snow Removal shapes its success by focusing on extraordinary treatment of their team and their clients

BY CHERYL HIGLEY | EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Looking back on their first experience in the snow & ice management industry, it's surprising that K.C. and Maggie Downer didn't run as fast and as far away as they could.

Working at a large snow & ice management company in Chicago, Maggie's focus was sales and customer service. She met K.C. when he was hired as a plow driver. As the company grew, the level of service suffered, which alienated customers and employees—who, the Downers say, often found themselves bearing the brunt of the customers' ire.

Fresh out of college, Maggie and K.C. decided they had a better way and struck out on their own. In fall 2007, Northwest Snow Removal was born. The Downers hold no grudges and are even thankful for the experience.

"I don't think our employer had bad intentions. He just kept taking on too much and hoping it would work," Maggie says. "We know there is profit in this industry, but you can't sacrifice service to get it. You have to take care of your employees and your clients."

Getting a snow & ice management company off the ground in a tough market like Chicago was a daunting task. But Maggie & K.C. found themselves with access to a great group of subcontractors

and a bevy of prospects, including some customers who sought out Maggie when they heard she was starting her own business. They started the first season with 19 subcontractors servicing 85 properties, primarily small and medium-sized retail sites that allowed for tight routing and quick service turnaround. Northwest Snow Removal was on the map.

Choosing the best clients

As the first line of contact with customers at the previous company, Maggie became skilled at searching out quality leads and building client relationships. She knew exactly the type of clients she wanted in order to steadily and successfully grow the family business.

"I learned to recognize the signals of clients who had unrealistic expectations or those who weren't going to pay. We turned a lot of work away in that first year, but in hindsight it was a good decision," she says. "With the way the market turned, I know we wouldn't have gotten paid."

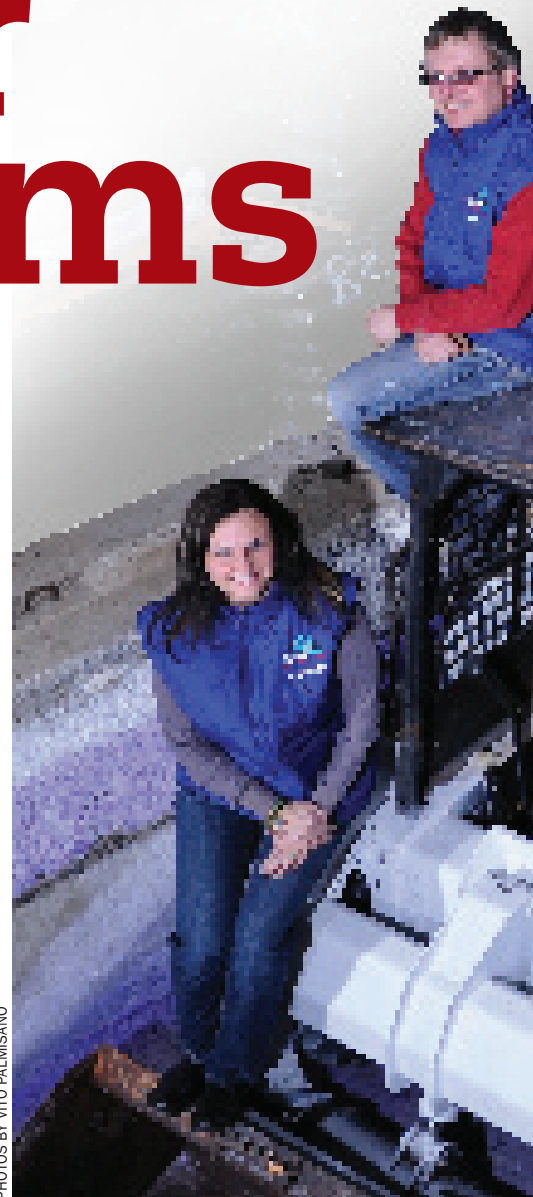
The Downers stress the importance of a good client relationship, and they strive to achieve 100% satisfaction. They encourage praise and criticism at any time. The reach out often, and at the end of each season every customer has the opportunity to provide feedback

PHOTOS BY VITO PALMISANO

Northwest Snow Removal's power couple K.C. and Maggie Downer (center) are building a team that they can rely on and will allow them to step back and strike a better balance between work and family.

anonymously through a survey.

"The door is always open for our clients. Our aim is to please them," Maggie says. "I have had to listen to the screaming customers who were not receiving the proper response. I never wanted to be in that position again, and that drives our attitude toward customer service."





Choosing the best subs

From an operational standpoint, K.C. has a laser-like focus on what it takes to deliver outstanding service, while also honoring the commitment of the owner-operators who serve as Northwest's subcontractors.

He strives to match owners and their equipment with the right sites and to create a route time of three to four hours, which allows them to provide better service and respond more appropriately in the event of breakdowns.

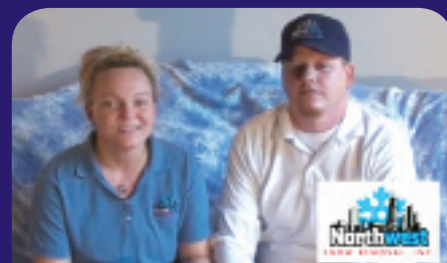
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About the winning video

When K.C. and Maggie Downer decided to create a video for the Greatest Story Never Told, they decided to depict what life was like before they started their own company. K.C. says a video just showing their current success wouldn't tell the whole story. Their previous experiences in the industry, Maggie says, while painful helped them build a better company.

"I didn't appreciate it at the time, but it was a great learning experience. We wouldn't be here today had we not gone through it," she says.

Hear more of K.C. and Maggie's story in their video interview and check out their winning video—as well as the other entries—at www.goplow.com.



<http://goplow.com/story/nwsnow-2012.html>

Teachable moments

K.C. AND MAGGIE DOWNER learned the hard way that snow & ice management isn't an easy business. Past experiences gave them plenty of "teachable moments" to utilize as they launched their business in 2007:

Know when to say "no." A self-described pushover, Maggie Downer, CSP, has to restrain herself from giving

clients whatever they want, especially when it's something that goes above and beyond the contract terms or isn't in the company's best interest. "You have to know when to say 'no,' even if it may cost you a client," she says. "There is so much liability at stake. They have to trust us to know that we'll do what's best for their property. You have to stand your ground. When they sign the contract they know exactly what we're going to do. We leave nothing to chance."

Welcome to the industry. You have to set your employees up for success, says K.C. Downer, CSP. On his very first snowplowing job, he was sent to a 9-acre site to battle a 9-in. storm with a 3/4-ton truck equipped with an 8-ft. plow. Another employee was expected to hand shovel 8,000 sq. ft. of sidewalks. "I would never, ever set someone up for



CSPs K.C. and Maggie Downer may be young but they're taking the right approach to growing Northwest Snow Removal.

that. You have to have the right equipment and the right person for each job—and make sure they have the right amount of work when planning routes. If you overload them they won't be efficient and they will fail themselves, the company and the client."



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Northwest focuses on making sure its subcontractors have all the right tools for success. For example, a large number of the company's subcontractors are Polish and Slovakian, and English is not their first language. The Downers have created site maps in their native languages to ensure there is no confusion about instructions and expectations.

"The quality of our owner-operators is a direct contributor to our success, and we want them to be successful as well. They all take pride in their equipment and in the work they produce. We have set routes and site-specific crews, which allows them to take ownership of those sites," K.C. says.

In addition to providing outstanding service to Northwest's clients, K.C. says the owner-operators were helpful in bringing opportunities from clients they serve in the off-season and in helping to secure salt when prices skyrocketed and supply dropped a few years back.

Maggie says the couple knows how blessed they are to have the support of strong subcontractors: "We were very lucky to have the sheer amount of owner-operators in our area who were willing to come on board during the first year. The first winter was rough, both from a snow and a capital standpoint, but they believed in us and saw us through."

Choosing the right balance

As if starting a new business wasn't life-changing enough, K.C. and Maggie watched their personal relationship take a similar path. Having weathered their

first winter, the couple became engaged. They married in 2009, and their son Cayden was born in 2010. They also jumped feet first into becoming involved with SIMA. Both have achieved certified snow professional (CSP) designations, and Maggie serves on the Snow & Ice Symposium planning committee

and will present at this year's event.

With a growing business and a growing family, it quickly became apparent that K.C. and Maggie needed to tackle their next challenge—achieving a balance between work and family. While initially difficult, Maggie says they're

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» SPECIAL THANKS to Arctic Snow & Ice Control for sponsoring this year's Greatest Story Never Told video contest and for its generous donation of an Arctic Sectional Sno-Pusher to this year's winner. The Downers will receive their plow on Feb. 13. Read more about Arctic's snow & ice story on Page 40.

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WITH A SINGLE SNOWPLOW, 1977 Chevy blazer and a passion for snow, Randy Strait took one snowy Chicago evening and turned it into big business. Today, more than 30 years later, Arctic Snow & Ice Control is an established snow removal service.

After several years of pushing snow, Strait became fed up with snow pushers that didn't clear down to the surface, left significant amounts of snow behind and were costly to repair. He knew there had to be a better way, something that would improve his company's efficiency and give it a competitive edge. From these struggles came more than 20 years of research, design, testing and the final introduction of the Sectional Sno-Pusher.

1982 The origins of the Sectional Sno-Pusher go back to 1982, when Strait first began research and development of a new pusher design. More than 10 years later, in 1993, Strait produced his first unit featuring a sectional moldboard design. This was key to what would eventually make the pusher so unique and set it apart from all others. The now-patented design is comprised of individual 32-inch moldboard sections. Combined with spring loaded trip edges, the unit's sections move up and down independently and contour to bumps and dips in pavement, enabling a greater amount of snow to be cleared in one pass. Each trip edge also features a hardened-steel cutting edge to scrape hardpacked snow and ice down to the pavement for enhanced clearing results.

1993 While delivering a clean lot was certainly top priority for Strait and his team, they also wanted to increase safety, while cutting down on damage their old snow pushers were causing to customers' lots. In the same year that the sectional moldboard design was born came Strait's next innovation: mechanical side panels. Unlike rigid, fixed side panels found on most containment pushers, Sectional

Sno-Pusher's mechanical side panels sense impact and lift over obstacles, up to 9 inches high, hidden beneath the snow. Curbs, islands, manholes and medians are no longer a worry.

1993 During his time working on the Sectional Sno-Pusher, Strait's service company was continuing to grow – and as the company grew, so did the need to add new operators. Training operators on proper pusher positioning was worth the time investment, but the process itself was frustrating and tricky for new operators trying to keep up efficiency. This led Strait to create the Slip-Hitch™ design. With 'drop-and-go' technology, the Slip-Hitch adjusts itself to the pavement for ideal positioning and pushing performance—and not just each time it's picked up and dropped, but continually during the pushing process, ensuring optimal results and less operator fatigue.

Finally, Strait's commitment to responding to snow events on a moment's notice and providing customers with timely clearing meant his fleet had to be ready to spring into action at the drop of a flake. Thus, time-consuming maintenance from typical pushers was cutting into the company's productivity—another factor driving the final design of the Sectional Sno-Pusher. A damaged section or cutting edge can be individually replaced in just minutes, reducing time and cost.

2005 After testing the pusher and seeing how well it helped his company improve efficiency and gain a competitive edge, Strait wanted to offer that same ability to other frustrated contractors.

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finally starting to get a handle on it.

The first step was realizing that two Type A personalities both wanting to be in control was not good for business. The solution: divvying up responsibilities and allowing each to shine in their area of expertise—Maggie in sales, marketing and customer relationships, and K.C. in operations and driver relationships.

“We expect excellence from each other, and we make each other better,” K.C. says. “We really looked at the work flow to see who was responsible for getting the job done. Before, we thought two heads were better than one, but with the division of duties it has allowed both of us to focus on what we’re best at and to organize ourselves better to allow us to take more time for our family.”

The next step, Maggie says, is to eliminate the home office, which threatens family time, and to start building up a staff that can assume more responsibility.

“When it’s your baby, you take such pride in the business and have that hands-on approach. Having a family so quickly has forced us to figure out stuff faster than we would have otherwise—and that means taking the time to hire and properly train people we trust with our business.”

Choosing the next step

With a strong group of subcontractors and a growing office staff, Northwest has increased its portfolio to include 55 crews and 140 sites. They have a lot of people counting on the company’s success, and K.C. is looking forward to the future. “We are very hardworking people who focus our energy on what makes us happy. Right now, nothing makes me happier than knowing our drivers will have a job when it snows.”

While snow might be foremost in their minds now, the Downers are ready to look at diversifying into other areas. The decision wasn’t made lightly and won’t be done hastily, they say, but many of their customers are looking for a full-service provider. As they research the possibilities, they’ll rely on their support system that hasn’t steered them wrong

so far—their subcontractors, their SIMA colleagues ... and each other.

“We need to get educated before we jump into the next phase. But we will not let our growth come at the sacrifice of our existing clients,” Maggie says. “We are still a young company and have a lot to learn. We’re not going to puff

out our chests and say we can be everything to everyone. We’ve seen companies fail at that, and it’s their clients who end up calling us.” **SB**

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