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Case Study #6: Professional Services Provider

Company Name and Location: D. Rain & Sons,
Flushing New York

Founded: 1953

Company Background:
Family owned plumbing
company.



Markets/Industries Served: Mostly homes, some
businesses.

Interviewee: Claude Rain, owner/master plumber

The Story So Far

“Why do I need a Web site?” was one of the primary questions that Claude Rain of D. Rain & Sons used to ask. “Now, it’s perfectly obvious. But back in 2011, it really seemed unnecessary, or the kind of thing you just did because everyone else was doing it. It took me some time to see the value in it.”

Historically speaking, marketing and advertising for plumbers, electricians, or other types of professional service providers was fairly straightforward. There was **telephone directory listing**—and perhaps Yellow Pages display advertising—and **word of mouth**. Plumbing, as the emblematic example of this business category, is almost by definition classic pull marketing: no amount of push marketing is going to impel someone to hire a plumber unless they need one. It’s usually the homeowner in an emergency situation—the basement is flooding, the toilet doesn’t

work, the shower leaks, “my husband went nuts with the duct tape”—that needs a plumber. Therefore, being able to be found readily is a very large part of the battle.

Vehicle graphics have thus been a vital way of becoming conspicuous. Seeing trucks around town, or in an unfortunate neighbor’s driveway, is a good way for professional service providers to get the names of their businesses out there. The original implementation of vehicle graphics—adhesive letters and numbers typically used on mailboxes—was not highly sophisticated. “But it got the job done.”

Reputation is another part. Despite the emergency nature of demand for plumbing services, potential customers are leery of “cold calling” service providers. “Am I going to get ripped off?” “Should I trust this guy with my investment, that is, my home?” “What if they’re creepy?” “Can’t they afford belts? I mean, come on.” So for many service providers, **professional reputation** is extremely important, which is why D. Rain & Sons’ Yellow Pages ads have always included the line “Known and respected since 1953.” “The idea is,” says Mr. Rain, “that if we had a bad reputation, we would have gone out of business decades ago.”

D. Rain & Sons—now, technically, C. Rain & Sons, as Claude and his two sons are the company principals—operated on old man Derek Rain’s marketing M.O.^{32 33}



Claude Rain

³² Dr. Joe always loves when Richard uses Latin, since Dr. Joe took two years of it in high school and can barely remember “The farmer is good not bad.” M.O. means *modus operandi*, or the method of operation. It’s fallen out of use since *Dragnet* went off the air. No, Dr. Joe’s not related to star and producer of *Dragnet*, Jack Webb. I mean, c’mon, if he was, don’t you think he’d be spending his day as a trust fund baby wandering aimlessly on some Caribbean island, calling the bank and the trust officer on his satellite phone and complaining about how hot it is and there’s way too much sand everywhere? No. He’s stuck in New England, pounding away at a keyboard all day, trying to sound interesting by writing snarky footnotes that he hopes escape the edits of that Romano guy. You know, the funny and smart Romano guy, not the other one.

³³ Richard is Googling “Rhode Island therapist”...

Pipe Dreams

However, as Claude’s sons are starting to come of age and become interested in the business, and specifically growing it, they are seeking to become the very model of a modern plumbing company, using all the old and new media tricks of the trade—even trying some things that Claude has never heard of.

“It was around 2011 that I started asking why we need a Web site and my thirteen-year-old son Dwayne said that more and more people were looking to get information about their service providers, and even schedule service calls that way, so I guess it seemed to make sense.” “It seemed obvious to me it was the way we needed to go and stuff” adds Dwayne. On the company Web site, they began to add testimonials from satisfied customers and a list of references, touted that they were a Better Business Bureau member, and included a lengthy history of the company, stressing that they have been active members of the Flushing community for generations. Younger son Kane produced an **online video** of the family and the company.

“One of the things we wanted to stress was that we were what has become known as a ‘clean’ plumber,” says Claude. “That is, we wear **official company jumpsuits**, we have plastic shoe covers so we don’t track dirt into people’s homes, we lay down mats to keep kitchen and bathroom floors clean. Heck, we’re cleaner than a lot of the homes we go into.” The company also produced a **broadcast ad** for the local cable system promoting themselves as a new kind of plumbing company. In one memorable moment, all three of them—Claude, Dwayne, and Kane—turn around and squat in front of the camera, demonstrating the lack of “plumber butt.” “I’ve actually been kind of sensitive to that,” says Claude. “Early in my career I had that problem and one customer stood across the kitchen and started throwing quarters in there....It was uncomfortable and embarrassing, so it’s something I have fought against ever since.” The full jumpsuits serve another purpose: “We spent some money and had an

elaborate company logo stitched on the back. The boys have cheaper versions; they're still growing and it makes little sense to go all-out on a company jumpsuit they'll soon outgrow, but it still reinforces our brand."

Claude also went all out on **revamped vehicle graphics**. "I thought those stick-on mailbox letters and numbers started looking a little chintzy, so when I bought a new van, I had professional vehicle wrappers add much better graphics. The company's logo, a take on the medical profession's *caduceus*³⁴ only using a plumbing snake instead, is rendered in full color on both side of the van, with the company name (which is also repeated on the back doors).

D. Rain & Sons still uses printed **business cards**, with embedded QR codes as well as a litany of printed contact information. "Customers don't expect plumbers or other service providers to be very high-tech, so they're surprised when we show them the QR code access, the e-mail address, and the fact they can schedule appointments online." The company also maintains both a postal mailing list and an e-mail list, and they send out occasional **direct mail** and **direct e-mail** reminders for routine maintenance—"we service furnaces and air conditioners"—and other special offers. D. Rain & Sons also started providing regular **e-newsletters** that customers can sign up for. "We don't write and produce them, but we subscribe to a service that uses our brand but syndicates content. I had never heard of it, but Wayne came across it while poking around online. Our competition is other local plumbers, sure, but also big national franchises like Roto-Rooter or Roland J. Down. So we have been trying to emulate what they are doing as best we can. Content syndicates help, but it turns out that Kane has a flair for writing—Dwayne is the mathematical one—and he has been coming up with ideas for our own content. So we'll see where that goes."

³⁴ You know, that strange logo that physicians have with the snakes. Only Richard knows that it's called a *caduceus*. Everyone else calls it "that thing with the snakes." If doctors have it on their business cards or on their luggage tags when they fly, it is known as "That Thing With Snakes on a Plane."

Dwayne and Kane Tap Into Newer Media

“Once we had the Web site, the boys started looking for even newer media to use, and they, like many kids their age, are into **social media** like **Facebook**, so it was a no-brainer to set up a page for the company,” says Claude. “We have a surprising number of ‘likes.’” Kane also set up a **Twitter** feed. “It’s a work in progress,” admits Claude. “No one really wants to follow a plumber. Thankfully, we have the jumpsuits.” A cousin who is an expert in **search engine optimization** taught Dwayne how to tailor the site so as to come up in the top five hits of an **organic search**.

Location services like **Foursquare** and **Yelp!** are proving effective, and they are using those venues to offer special deals. The trick, says Claude, is to not make any coupons or deals too time-sensitive. “No one’s going to deliberately wreck their plumbing just to get 10% off fixing it. That would be weird.” They try to schedule promotions of maintenance during slow times. “Dwayne analyzed our sales by week over a few years, and we found out that by offering promotions for those slow times, it allowed us to be more responsive to emergencies. We make sure to keep those first really cold days in November and early December open for emergency calls, and also late May for air conditioning calls, so we don’t offer coupons at those times. Whenever we make a call, we leave them a business card suggesting when to get maintenance, and also to sign up for our promotions.”

The goal is for D. Rain & Sons to become a “next-generation plumber.”

Flush With Success

It’s not just new media initiatives, but also good old-fashioned **events** that help as well. Every year, D. Rain & Sons participates in a local home show, where they have a booth at which they partner with a local TV station to provide a “kids’ weather map,” green-screening booth visitors, having them give the weather. “We take part in seminars and other local events and offer tips for cutting

your water bill, lowering heating and cooling costs, how to protect your pipes in the winter, and things like that. It all helps keep our name out there.” Although no homes or businesses in Flushing have wells, a colleague of Claude’s runs a plumbing company upstate, and he and Claude participated in a water softening tutorial. “As I get older, I’m thinking of relocating out of the city so I need to learn about this stuff.”

The Final Word

“The question ‘why should I have a Web site’ has been answered to my complete satisfaction, and I think a very large part of it was that I have two creative, forward thinking sons in the business. Gosh, I hope they stay in the business... Someday, I plan to change the name of the company to C. Rain & Sons, and that will require a major rebranding effort. So I need to learn a bit more of this stuff before we go down that road.”

How the Channels Have Changed

What They Used to Do: 1960s/1970s

- Yellow Pages advertising
- word of mouth
- some advertising in local paper
- vehicle graphics (hand-stenciled graphics or adhesive letters)

What They Do Now: 2000s/2010s

- Yellow Pages advertising
- Uniforms/jumpsuits
- Superpages online site
- word of mouth
- Web site provides services offered, contact info, testimonials from satisfied customers, and on-line scheduling
- more sophisticated vehicle graphics
- location services like Yelp!, Foursquare
- QR codes on truck
- video on site “meet the owner”