

Plumber™

A CLASS ACT

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A CLASS ACT



Cliff's Classic Care Plumbing, Sierra Vista, Arizona

OWNERS	Cliff and Debra Lao
FOUNDED	2005
EMPLOYEES	3
SERVICES	Primarily residential repair and service
SERVICE AREA	100-mile radius around Sierra Vista
WEBSITE	www.cliffsclassiccareplumbing.com

▼ Cliff Lao (right) and son, A.J. Lao, with their 1 1/2-ton 1957 Studebaker Transtar truck near Sierra Vista, Arizona. The company uses only older model vehicles as its service vehicles.



Plumber's novel business approach shatters industry stereotypes, drives brand recognition

By Ken Wysocky
Photography by Mark Henle

Hobbies and work don't often intersect in the business world. But at Cliff's Classic Care Plumbing, co-owner Cliff Lao combines a passion for classic, vintage vehicles with classy uniforms and exemplary service to redefine negative stereotypes about plumbers, as well as create a textbook case of branding.

A classic-car collector who once owned rare beauties like a 1962 Sunbeam Alpine sedan and a 1959 Studebaker Lark two-door wagon, Lao indelibly differentiates his company by driving service vehicles that reflect his love for all things automotive: a 1 1/2-ton 1957 Studebaker Transtar truck and a 1954 Chevrolet sedan delivery. The vehicles were not only relatively inexpensive (about \$11,000 for the Studebaker and roughly \$6,000 for the Chevy sedan delivery), they also make a distinct impression on potential customers in and around Sierra Vista, Arizona, where the company is based.

"This is a very competitive market," says Lao, 55, who co-owns the company with his wife, Debra, and works with his son, A.J. The company's primary focus is residential service work. "Everyone else is driving brand-new vehicles and you really can't tell one from the other. It's practically a cookie-cutter look.

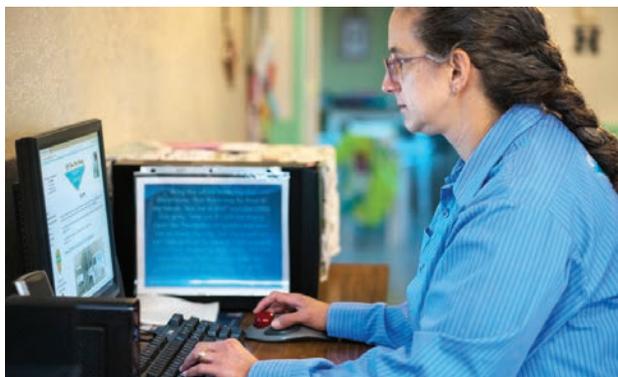
"But we stand out," he continues. "I'd say that the trucks generate about half of our service calls. We've had people flag us down while they're walking or even while driving. And many of them tell me, 'If you plumb as good as you take care of your trucks, then you're my plumber from now on.' Our trucks are the best calling card money can buy."

The company's snappy uniforms — a pressed blue shirt with dark pinstripes (embroidered with the company name and logo), white T-shirt, gray slacks and a black belt, black shoes and black socks — strongly reinforce the "classic" image Lao aims to project. He completes the period look with a jaunty gray newsboy cap. Lao buys the uniforms from Aramark. "I think that if you dress well, it shows customers that you'll take care of their homes as well as you dress," he adds.

Lao's father, Ruben, played a key role in inspiring the classic theme. Not only did he drive classic vehicles to reflect his company's name, Classic Rooter, back

◀ Debra Lao, Cliff's wife, works in her office at their company headquarters in Sierra Vista.

in the 1960s and '70s in California, he was also a dapper dresser. "When my father went to work, he always looked prim and proper, with shined shoes and



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Cliff Lao

◀ A.J. and Cliff Lao look for flexible water lines in their shop.

his shirt tucked in,” Lao explains. “He dressed like a professional, and it kind of stuck with me. I also wanted to remove myself as far as possible from the industry stereotypes.

“Our motto is ‘quality service, always in style,’ he adds.

RUNS IN THE FAMILY

Born in Spanish Harlem in the 1930s, Ruben Lao got into the plumbing business at an early age. Lao worked for

his father while growing up, either on “the end of a shovel” or hauling cast iron pipe. “He was very old-school,” Lao explains. “If I wanted a new baseball glove or a part for my motorcycle, there was sweat involved.”

But Lao never planned on becoming a plumber. It was only after working various jobs, including stints as a car mechanic and a logger, that he realized his father’s footsteps offered a path worth following. So in the 1970s, he again worked for his father, who by this time had moved

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to California. “All that time, my father was teaching me a trade and I didn’t even realize it,” Lao says.

In September 1990, Lao opened his own business in Apple Valley, California, called Delao Plumbing (named after his father’s original ethnic name). But after about seven years, the business failed. One factor was 24-hour emergency service, which Lao said took its toll over the years.

Lao then moved to Sierra Vista, where he worked for several plumbing companies before striking out on his own once again. The tipping point occurred when a friend at church encouraged him to start his own company as a counter against other plumbers who were taking advantage of elderly people. “Being churchgoing people, my wife and I prayed about it and came to agreement that we would start a company,” he says. “But we agreed to not offer 24-hour emergency service because family is more important.”

The company remains a relatively small operation. Aside from the two classic trucks, the company’s only other major pieces of equipment are three Spartan Tool drain cleaning machines: a Spartan 1065 (for cleaning 3- to 10-inch-diameter lines); a Model 100 (for 1 1/4- to 4-inch pipes); and a Model 700, a hand-held unit for shower, tub and sink drains. Lao prefers Milwaukee power tools and also owns a 2,100-pound-capacity winch, mounted on the Studebaker and manufactured by Warn Industries Inc.

BUYING IN BULK

Lao’s business isn’t all about just marketing and branding, however. He also takes a very commonsense approach to business, which carries over into how he purchases repair parts. Instead of constantly making trips to supply houses, Lao instead mail orders most of his parts from Wolverine Brass in South Carolina.

Why buy parts via mail? For one, Lao’s father also relied almost exclusively on Wolverine parts. Secondly, he believes brass is more durable. Third, Wolverine offers a lifetime warranty on all their parts — a great selling point for customers. “Over the years, I’ve learned firsthand what works and doesn’t, and Wolverine Brass parts work,” he notes. Last but not least, Lao says he believes in just doing things differently.

The Laos work out of their home. Lao stores the parts in a “warehouse” that’s actually about a 160-square-foot

▶ Cliff Lao checks the work his son is doing as they replace a bathroom faucet.



For more on Cliff’s Classic Care Plumbing, go to www.plumbermag.com/featured

shed on the property. While ordering parts by mail would appear to be more expensive than buying from local supply houses, Lao says the prices actually are competitive because he orders in bulk, plus he has a long-standing relationship with Wolverine.

“I’ve used them since I was a plumber in California, so they give us a break on purchases because they know we’re not some fly-by-night handyman,” he explains. “If we order, say, 100 ball valves, they know we’ll sometimes go through them in a month or two.”

On average, Lao carries roughly \$10,000 to \$15,000 worth of repair parts in his inventory, including specialty parts for customers with older homes. That pays dividends when Lao works in a 100-year-old home, for example. “I know I’ll have something in the shop,” he says. “It removes the guesswork about whether or not local supply houses carry an older part.”

“Our motto is ‘quality service, always in style.’”

Cliff Lao

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AN EMPHASIS ON SERVICE

To provide top-notch customer service, Lao does all the things that customer-minded plumbers do, such as wearing shoe covers in customers' homes and spreading a tarp before starting on a job to keep the space clean.

But one of Lao's highest priorities is simply listening intently to customers so he can sufficiently address their needs. That includes asking good questions when customers call so he can accurately diagnose the problem and be sure he has the right parts on the truck. He also emphasizes customer education. "If someone wants us to drain their water heater, and we find a plastic drain valve clogged with sediment, for instance, we physically show them the problem and replace it with something better, like a 3/4-inch full-port ball valve," he points out. "We also make a point of bringing other potential problems (other than the actual repair) to customers' attention."



▲ A.J. Lao works on a bathroom faucet component.

To keep things personal, and further enhance the company's branding, Debra Lao handcrafts thank-you cards for customers. "Some of our customers collect them and hang them on their walls," he says. Moreover, the Laos used to create custom Christmas cards and mail them to customers each year, but when they exceeded 600 customers, they had to start buying cards instead, Lao says.

How good is Cliff's Classic Care service? Lao says that for three years in a row, the company has earned a coveted Super Service Award from Angie's List, a national contractor-rating service that's based on reviews from consumers. Winners must meet strict eligibility requirements, including an overall "A" grade from customers. Less than 5 percent of contractors earn the award, according to the Angie's List website.

EYEING FUTURE GROWTH

Looking ahead, Lao says he'd definitely like to expand his business. But that would first require finding a tradesman who'd be a good fit for Lao's service-oriented approach. "It's just a matter of finding someone who's looking for a trade, not just a paycheck," he says.

Moreover, Lao hopes that A.J., who is currently an apprentice and will become a journeyman plumber in a year or so, will come on board as a business partner and eventually run the business. That might even open the door to 24-hour emergency service work, he says.

"Right now, we're limited to serving about a 100-mile radius around Sierra Vista,"

Lao explains, noting the limitations imposed by having just two plumbers in the company. "And as a practical matter, we currently don't advertise for emergency calls. But as A.J. becomes a journeyman, he might want to start taking emergency calls. Then we'd really have to find someone else that he can train."

Of course, another employee will require a third vintage vehicle to maintain the company's classic branding theme. "I'll have to start searching on eBay," Lao says. "I'm always watching (for classic cars) on eBay. I've probably owned as many cars as the years I've been on this Earth."

"There's always something out there that follows me home," he continues. "My wife thinks there's something wrong with me, but I've always enjoyed getting my hands dirty. I love turning wrenches." And adding a touch of class to the plumbing industry. **P**

“ My wife thinks there's something wrong with me, but I've always enjoyed getting my hands dirty. I love turning wrenches.”

Cliff Lao

Featured Equipment

Milwaukee Electric Tool Corp.
800/729-3878
www.milwaukeetool.com

Spartan Tool
800/435-3866
www.spartantool.com
Ad on page 5

Wolverine Brass
800/944-9292
www.wolverinebrass.com



◆ Cliff Lao, front, and his son, A.J. stand by their service vehicles. The company uses a 1 1/2-ton 1957 Studebaker Transtar truck and a 1954 Chevrolet sedan delivery. Cliff also requires the plumbers to wear gray slacks, a blue long-sleeved shirts and a gray newsboy cap to complete the old-time look.



Service vehicles deliver the marketing goods

When Cliff Lao and his wife, Debra, established Cliff's Classic Care Plumbing in Sierra Vista, Arizona, they wanted vintage service vehicles that would reflect the company's name, as well as tell customers they're in for a unique service experience.

The couple found exactly what they were looking for in a 1 1/2-ton 1957 Studebaker Transtar truck and a 1954 Chevrolet sedan delivery. Cliff Lao found both classic vehicles on eBay. The Chevy came first, purchased for \$6,000 in Long Beach, California.

"It was in pretty good shape," he says. "We had it rewired, added front disc brakes and replaced the wheels and tires."

When Lao needed a bigger vehicle, he found the completely restored Studebaker truck in Atlanta. "We negotiated for two years," he recalls. "The owner kept relisting it and finally came to a price (\$11,000) where I said, 'Let's go get it.'"

Two features caught Lao's attention: The vehicle's factory-installed power steering and a five-speed manual transmission with overdrive. Lao did research that showed only about 430 of the trucks were equipped that way. "There are areas in Cochise County where we have to drive in 'granny gear' (first gear)," he explains. "If you're climbing (in steeper terrain) or towing something, you definitely need the torque."

A local fabricator custom-built metal bins to store repair parts and tools. The Studebaker features an 8-foot-long cargo bed, and the metal bins can be removed if Lao needs more space. The engine, a 1963 Studebaker 289, is underpowered for the company's needs. Lao says it generates about 130 hp, not much for a truck with a gross vehicle weight of about 3,500 pounds. As such, he eventually plans to replace the engine with a more powerful unit.

While it might seem that older trucks don't offer the productivity-enhancing efficiencies provided by modern vehicles, which are more spacious and feature larger, comprehensive storage systems, Lao says that isn't the case. And even if the trucks were a little more inconvenient to work with, the marketing firepower they offer would more than offset any disadvantages, he notes.