

Small company wages an unsightly war against grease

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Environmental Biotech of Hawaii is arguably one of the least-glamorous technology companies in the state.

Despite its name it doesn't deal with nature or labs — or even research for that matter.

Environmental Biotech deals with grease — specifically, getting rid of it. The company uses a type of “friendly” bacteria that feeds on grease to clean pipes leading into grease traps. The system is designed for hotels and restaurants.

Grease is a big problem for food establishments, especially hotels, and while grease traps ensure most of the slimy stuff doesn't make it to city sewer lines, pipes leading into grease traps often can get clogged. That's where Environmental Biotech comes in, pumping its “friendly” bacteria into systems to ensure minimal buildup.

“It slows the buildup because the bacteria is eating the grease,” said Environmental Biotech of Hawaii Vice President Jackie Anderson.

To illustrate the grease-eating process, Environmental Biotech Manager Kim Billon takes a “grease kit” with her to show clients. The medium-sized duffel bag is a little shop of grease horrors. It includes

Small-business issue

Informing clients about a new, unglamorous product.

Strategies

- Educate clients about the product.
- Show examples of the product in action.
- Attract clients through referrals and build from there.

fat from a roasted chicken, a medium-sized jar of used fryer oil, a grease-filled pipe eaten away by chemicals (not bacteria) meant to clear grease, a grease-clogged pipe, a core sample of a grease trap to show its contents, and used grease taken from a drain.

“Death smells much worse,” Billon said, describing the used grease. “It doesn't even bother me, I'm so used to the smell.”

Working with such a disgusting product has been a bit of a hard sell for Environmental Biotech, especially for a system that generally costs more than the traditional methods of clearing pipes, such as snaking. But Anderson says the key to Environmental Biotech's success has been showing clients its ability to maintain the efficiency of a grease trap for a long period of time.

“If they didn't use our service, they would have to pump the grease trap

far more often,” she said.

Another aspect of selling “friendly bacteria” is alleviating any concerns clients have over safety, Billon said. That's where the “grease kit” comes into play in illustrating what the bacteria does and how it works and that it is safe and merely eats grease.

Environmental Biotech gets most of its clients through referrals, which helps because clients place greater trust in the company based on recommendations, Billon said.

The system starts at a little over \$200 per month with maintenance every two weeks for the smallest establishments, but can cost thousands of dollars for large hotels. There also is an installation fee for the equipment.

Environmental Biotech, a distributorship with corporate headquarters in Florida, came to Hawaii about 11 1/2 years ago and has seen revenue grow each year, Anderson said, though the company remains small, grossing under \$1 million last year.

Increasing business beyond that is merely a matter of changing perceptions about bacteria, Billon said.

“You always learn to kill bacteria,” she said. “There are good ones out there.”

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Kim Billon, manager of Environmental Biotech of Hawaii, holds an eight-inch pipe showing how grease can clog a line. Other items in her “grease kit” include chicken fat, waste grease from a sewer line and used fryer oil.