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New look for the old loo

Portable potties' makeover includes ads

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The blue sky, soaring trees and well-manicured green make the 15th hole at Oak Hill Golf Club in Hunterdon County look pretty inviting.

And that's just the portable toilet.

On the inside is the standard, boxy arrangement of any portable loo, but the exterior has been "wrapped" with an image from a pastoral golf course.

"It does make it look a lot more pleasant to the average golfer," said Mike Knight, the golf pro at Oak Hill. "It's far more attractive than a typical portable toilet."

While the main and self-evident purpose of portable restrooms has wavered little over the years, the industry itself has been evolving, from providing the simple construction-site staple to offering pretty murals and even luxury models in trailers.

One of the more recent ideas is to cover the exterior of the basic unit with advertisements.

"It's an interesting concept, especially if you look at advertising and targeting your audience," said Gary Weiner, president of Woodbridge-based Mr. John, provider of the unit at Oak Hill.

A Canadian ad business started pitching the idea to portable restroom distributors a couple of years ago. Micro Target Media, which also has offices in New York, has wrapped vinyl ads around banks of portable toilets at fairs, festivals and sporting events, said Vincent Laraia, general manager of sales and marketing.

Portable-toilet companies and event organizers get a cut of the revenue from advertising. "It's really creating passive or incremental income on something they didn't think they could make money on," Laraia said.

The idea of putting their brand on a toilet has not turned off advertisers, said Laraia. Market research conducted by his company shows about 75 percent of attendees at an event remember the brand wrapped on portable toilets, he said. Ford, Universal and GlaxoSmithKline are among the companies that have participated, he said.

Micro Target Media also places ads on the interior. Other nontraditional venues mentioned on the company's Web site include barricades and construction-debris containers.

Mr. John is part of Micro Target Media's advertising network, but Weiner said it has taken time for the concept to catch on locally. Just one event in New Jersey, in June, has featured the wrapped toilets, although Mr. John's restrooms have had ads at events in New York, Laraia said.

In the meantime, Weiner has been placing ads inside units to promote his own, more-upscale rentals.

"It is a new frontier," Weiner said. "If you stop and think about it, if you're in a portable toilet and there's an ad, we've got you."

Jess Thompson is not convinced the marriage of advertising and portable restrooms is the next big thing. As president of Johnny on the Spot in Old Bridge, he says he has declined overtures from companies wanting to use the units for advertising.

Instead, Thompson said, he is focused on the main business of providing portable toilets. His company and Mr. John are the largest portable-toilet operators in New Jersey.

About two dozen of the industry's 3,300 companies are based in the state, according to the Portable Sanitation Association International, a trade group. Last year, Johnny on the Spot acquired Rent-A-John of Sparta, which Thompson said is a big player in the luxury field.

GOING IN STYLE

The use of upscale restrooms in the \$1.5 billion industry has been increasing for at least a decade. The units, which are housed in trailers, can include wooden floors and cabinets, mirrors, private rooms for the flushable toilets, porcelain urinals and sinks with fresh water.

"If you're going to throw a 50,000- to 100,000-dollar wedding in your backyard, the restroom can't be a concern," Thompson said. "The portable-toilet stigma is a big one. We surprise them (the customers) on delivery. They're shocked."

The units, the most luxurious of which can be rented for as much as \$4,000 a day, are used for special events, private parties and movie and music video shoots. Mr. John sent 36 upscale trailers along with about 450 standard portable toilets to Oakmont Country Club in Pennsylvania for the U.S. Open golf tournament in June.

Mr. John is providing portable restrooms for the ongoing U.S. Open tennis tournament in Queens. And two months from now, units from Johnny on the Spot are to be placed at the starting line of the New York City Marathon.

Working high-profile sporting events and private celebrity parties (the companies are not naming names) may be nice. But Thompson and Weiner are most wistful when talking about how their portable toilets are now part of fake Jersey mob history.

Both companies have had restrooms appear in separate episodes of "The Sopranos." Yep, New Jersey and portable toilets -- perfect together.

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