



Color-coded and well-marked parts bins make it easier to complete a daily inventory of restroom replacement parts. (Photos courtesy of Spanky's Portable Services)

# The Big Fix

**If you haven't already set up a repair parts inventory system, it's time to get organized to save money and time**

*By Jim Kneiszel*

It's Friday afternoon before a major special event, and you've noticed that a couple of units headed out of the yard need new skids.

If you have to rush-order two skids from the manufacturer and ship them overnight, then pay one of your workers overtime to install them, the repair bill is going to be mighty hefty.

How much money would you have saved per repair if you bought skids from the same manufacturer in an order of 50, delivered by a standard method of freight?

The rush order, expensive shipping and overtime pay are your penalty for failing to organize your inventory into a logical system. We spoke to a variety of portable restroom operators — companies large and small — about organizing parts inventories. They all said that careful planning and an understanding of a company's restroom usage will save PROs money and headaches down the road.

Jake Nyberg of Spanky's Portable Services in Carlsbad, Calif., for instance, said the business became much more efficient when it opened a central warehouse to store and ship repair parts to drivers in a wide region.

"We found that by consolidating our buying power, we were able to get better rates on rivets, springs and hardware that go into all the units," Nyberg says.

"Before, we kept running into problems placing orders for small quantities. When you buy in smaller amounts, you don't get the benefit of the larger order. We weren't managing our orders correctly, and consolidated that all under one person."

Nyberg has spent a lot of time organizing the central warehouse location and putting systems in place to keep the parts supplies up to date to avoid ever having an emergency order raise the company's costs. But proper parts inventory control is a constant battle, he says.

"If you're not counting (parts inventory), don't expect great results," Nyberg warns. "If you don't watch it every single day, you'll be surprised how quickly you have no idea at all what the condition of your inventory is."

The following are repair inventory tips developed after talking to a number of PROs:

## **1 ORGANIZE YOUR WAREHOUSE SPACE**

Whether you're a huge company with thousands of square feet of warehouse, or a one-man show with a glorified broom closet for storage, you'll save money and migraines by getting your parts and supplies saved in an orderly manner. Take whatever space you have and look at cubic feet rather

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than floor space, preparing to store things vertically rather than by just tossing them in the corner. Buy and mark a series of rugged plastic bins for hinges, rivets and other commonly needed parts. Find a convenient place, possibly in an attic space or covered outside location, to stack and stow wall panels, doors, roofs and skids, both new replacement parts and salvage parts from older restrooms. Separate panels by color and manufacturer so you don't have to toss a few dozen to get to the right one.

## 2 TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TECHNOLOGY TO TRACK PARTS

Don't just mark the storage bins with masking tape and Sharpie markers, although that may be more organization than you're used to already. Use the most up-to-date inventory-tracking computer software and barcode technology to keep a better handle on the flow of repair parts. Using barcodes on parts packaging will allow you to access accurate inventory records hour by hour, from your office or a remote location. If you outfit your trucks or home office with a computer and access to the database, you'll always know how many widgets you have in stock and never be caught short when you need a part on an evening or weekend.

## 3 APPOINT AN INVENTORY MANAGER

Tracking parts and supplies will take some time and someone to organize the effort. If you buy into the value of using technology and keeping ade-

quate replacement parts on hand, you also know that keeping well-stocked is a never-ending challenge. If you're a small company, tap someone in the office to be responsible for setting up and maintaining the parts inventory system. If you have a manageable number of units and trucks, this job may only require a fraction of a full-time worker's job description. The more units and trucks you have in the field, the more likely you'll want to dedicate an employee to the task.



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## 4 STANDARDIZE YOUR PRODUCT LINE

If you've bought out several small companies' inventories over the years, you're stuck maintaining several brands of restrooms and associated products. But whether you're starting with several product lines or you've just started the business with your first order of 100 units, the advice is clear as you move forward: Limit the number of restroom models and makers you work with. Standardize your inventory as much as possible to limit the space you'll

need to store replacement parts and the capital expense you'll have tied up in spare parts. There are other advantages to sticking with one or two product lines: Employees will catch on faster to all necessary repairs and quirks of each unit in service. And uniform units will give your stock a more professional look on location, particularly where you have a large bank of units in service.

## 5 IDENTIFY UNIVERSAL REPAIR PARTS

You may find that a particular skid, rivet or door hinge will work in a few different applications. The more universal repair options you can identify, the more efficient your parts warehousing will

be. If you can use the same replacement part on two different restroom models, you'll also tie up less money on inventory. Network with your friends in the industry to come up with more economical repair solutions and parts that cross over between different restroom units.

## 6 FORGE GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH VENDORS

Remember the Golden Rule? Same rules apply when you're developing good working relationships with your inventory vendors. The more closely you work with the sales rep who handles your restroom orders, the more



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likely you'll keep the shelves stocked with repair parts at all times. A sales rep can make suggestions for efficient ordering of replacement parts. In fact, a vendor may be able to help you monitor your own parts needs and suggest ways to make more timely and accurate orders based on your service history. Talk to your manufacturer's reps for all products and find out if they offer enhanced services based on all the technology at their disposal. You may be surprised that your vendors are interested in more than simply taking your orders and your credit card number.

## 7 KNOW WHEN TO REPLACE OR REPAIR

It might not make sense to put a new skid on a restroom with a deteriorating roof. If the door is about to fail, are you sure you want to replace the holding tank? Learn to gauge which repairs should send you to the recycling bin and which should send you to the shop with the unit. When a fix is usually done with inexpensive parts and limited labor, be sure to stock a good supply of the replacement parts. When a repair requires an expensive part or extensive labor time, shy away from major replacement parts inventories. If you live with a specific restroom model for months and years, you'll learn the signs that tell you to call it quits and order a new unit. You'll also have a better idea which parts to recycle for future repairs and which parts shouldn't take up valuable space in the warehouse.



After cleaning, restrooms are stored in rows waiting for the next job. An orderly yard will enhance service efficiency.

## 8 BUY IN BULK TO SAVE MONEY

Your per-unit cost for any part may drop with a larger order. The bigger the order, the greater the savings. Don't ever forget the hassle and extra expense you incurred the last time you had to special-order a single part and have it shipped overnight so you could effectively serve an important client. If you find yourself placing smaller orders for the same part several times a year, try to place large orders, but only once or twice a year. Any time you order less than 10 units of a common wear part, stop and consider whether you should order more now to avoid spending time on a second order later. By the same token, be careful not to over-order a part you'll only need a few times a year. And keep a careful eye on parts orders if you expect to phase out a particular restroom unit or if the manufacturer is planning to upgrade the unit in the near future.



## 9 OUTFIT EACH TRUCK WITH A BASIC RESTROOM REPAIR KIT

It might make more sense for your driver to make simple repairs in the field rather than drag a working unit back to the shop. Give all common repairs a great deal of thought and prepare a tip sheet for your drivers listing repairs they can do on location and fixes that require them to return to the shop. Then be sure that each driver can complete the repairs in a timely fashion. Each technician is going to have a different level of competence when it comes to repairs. If you're going to have drivers complete certain repairs out of the truck, you need to provide them with a repair kit with a well-stocked toolbox and a logical inventory of replacement parts. The restroom repair kit should be checked and restocked the same way you monitor the inventory back at the shop. ■



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