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ENTERPRISE By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS



Upstart SDT Tries To Make a Splash In the Trash Business

New Orleans Firm Uses Experimental Methods And Sleek, Clean Trucks February 20, 2007; Page B9

In New Orleans's French Quarter, it seemed nothing could ever stanch the morning-after party scent permeating from its famed Bourbon Street -- especially during Mardi Gras.

"There's a whole bunch of beer spilled and liquor and whatever else, and when the sun comes up...it all ferments," says Leonce Collins, a 10-year French Quarter resident and local tour guide. "When I've taken tourists out, I was almost ashamed."

TRASH TALK

- What's New: Small player SDT is trying make a mark in the stodgy business of trash collection as it helps New Orleans's French Quarter clean up its image.
The Approach: A cadre of neatly dressed workers and spotless, sleek trucks patrol streets, especially during the Mardi Gras revelry.
What's Next: The company has launched a glitzy TV-ad campaign to expand its services to other parts of Louisiana as well as out of state.

But this year, Mr. Collins and others hope, things may be different when Carnival revelry officially ceases at midnight.

Since January, responsibility for trash collection and street cleaning in the French Quarter has been in the hands of Sidney Torres IV, a local real-estate entrepreneur. In a few short months, 31-year-old Mr. Torres

and his new company, SDT Waste & Debris Services LLC, under new guidelines from the city, have attempted to clean up the image of waste removal in the historic neighborhood.

With its sleek, polished trucks, glitzy marketing and experimental cleaning methods, SDT illustrates how small outsiders can come into stodgy industries and get noticed by shaking up protocol.

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ABOUT ENTERPRISE

Gwendolyn (Wendy) Bounds writes about the quirks and challenges of small business and entrepreneurship most Tuesdays in the Enterprise column. Wendy has worked for the Journal for over a decade and was part of a team that helped develop the paper's Personal Journal. A native of North Carolina, she is the author of a new nonfiction book, "Little Chapel on the River," published by William Morrow. The book chronicles her experiences at an old Irish pub in New York's

What Mr. Torres and SDT are doing is a "totally different approach," says Mark Wilson, president of the French Quarter Business Association.

New Tactics

Instead of just flushing streets with water, Mr. Torres is testing new scents such as lemon or eucalyptus to reduce the squalid odor. The company's giant flusher and sweeper trucks are painted in an unusual black-and-white style. And there's a cadre of lime-green sidewalk and gutter sweepers that resemble snow mobiles. All trucks are scrubbed by hand each night so they hit the streets the next day spotless. And Mr. Torres has started outfitting them with global-positioning systems for better scheduling. He says he also is building a \$3 million facility to house a mechanic shop as well as a \$300,000 automated car wash.

SDT workers wear trendy black Dickies pants, steel-toed boots and customized shirts with the company's bull logo -- which Mr. Torres designed to pay homage to his family's bullfighter heritage.

His company's clean look seems to be extending to the city as well. "This is the cleanest I've ever seen the Quarter," says Mr. Collins, the tour guide.

With an eye on expanding his waste-removal services to New Orleans businesses and residences not serviced under city contracts, as well as other parts of the state, Mr. Torres also is running a series of glitzy local-TV ads more reminiscent of beer marketing than garbage. The ads feature local musicians and pithy slogans such as, "You can't beat the bull."

Mr. Torres' efforts stem, in part, from a new resolve among New Orleans officials to change the way their most visible neighborhood is perceived. "When we came back from Katrina, we looked at things differently," says Mr. Wilson. "We can't market this city or bring back tourism without the Quarter being clean."



Veronica White, New Orleans sanitation director, with Sidney Torres IV whose small waste company now cleans the French Quarter.



Romney Photography

One of the new, sleek SDT trucks being used to clean up New Orleans' French Quarter

historic Hudson River Valley. (See www.gwendolynbounds.com¹ for more.)

• Write to Wendy at wendy.bounds@wsj.com²

The city's longstanding contract with trash giant **Waste Management Inc.** expired last year, and the company didn't bid again. "We felt that we preferred not to do it because we couldn't meet the bid specifications and didn't feel comfortable going forward," says Wes Muir, a spokesman for Waste Management.

Veronica White, director of the New Orleans sanitation department, says that when she thought about the specifics for the new contract, "I thought about Disney World and how you always see someone with a broom and dust pan in the street sweeping."

Per the city's request, there is now a cadre of human street sweepers on duty even when trucks aren't rolling. In total, SDT puts in 16 hours a day cleaning the Quarter, five days a week of pressure washing and has twice-daily trash pickup.

Today, Fat Tuesday, is D-Day for both Ms. White and SDT. In addition to his usual staff, Mr. Torres has hired 50 additional employees to help clean the most

populated areas. Since Friday, SDT has been on call 24 hours a day, operating from a mobile command center set up inside a tour bus near one of the main parade routes. After Saturday's partying, they started cleaning the French Quarter at 3:30 a.m. and finished at 10:15 a.m.

"There was mounds and mounds of garbage," says Mr. Torres, who drove one of the trucks.

Talking Up Trash

Mr. Torres stumbled into the trash-collection trade as a result of the August 2005 storm.



A former self-described "gopher" to musician Lenny Kravitz, and the son of a prominent New Orleans attorney, Mr. Torres had been developing real estate in his hometown prior to the hurricane. After Katrina hit, he had 150 empty hotel rooms in the French Quarter, a location virtually untouched by the flood waters.



Romney Photography

So he purchased \$1 million worth of generators, water equipment and mobile-home trailers and then began setting up camps in those hotel rooms and the trailers under government contracts for the U.S. Marshals, the

See the upstart company in action.

U.S. Secret Service and officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA.

At first, Mr. Torres tried hiring someone to remove waste from the camps, but says "they wanted to charge me crazy prices." So he purchased his first waste truck and two dumpsters, putting his name and number on them. Soon after, residents and local businesses desperate for trash removal called -- and SDT Waste & Debris was born. He subsequently bid on, and won, a contract to clean the French Quarter and downtown district as well as a separate contract for the nearby St. Bernard Parish.

Mr. Torres sees his waste work in the French Quarter as a high-profile stepping stone to other parts of Louisiana and the country, such as Atlanta.

Since December, he has spent about \$60,000 to \$70,000 in TV advertising to try to woo more lucrative commercial accounts and other municipalities. To date, he has about 4,000 commercial accounts in New Orleans and surrounding parishes and expects revenue of \$25 million to \$30 million in 2007.

He also has hired local musicians to give testimonials for his ads, including jazz trombonist Troy Andrews, a.k.a. Trombone Shorty. "I live in the French Quarter," Mr. Andrews says, "and when I wake up from taking a nap and all hours of the day you see these people cleaning up, and it's a beautiful thing."

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