Leading Your Company in Difficult Times: Business Considerations for PCO’s
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This is the 3rd article in our series titled Leading your Company in Difficult Times and is specifically written to give some business considerations to PCO’s. In the first article we covered the science of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) and what it means to be an “essential service”. In the second article of the series we tried to understand some of the economic impacts and projections of the virus.

As business leaders, we are often challenged to manage competing interests but the current COVID-19 pandemic presents a set of unique challenges that most of us have never faced before. The health and safety of our customers, staff, and our families at home are a top priority; but as business owners, we also have a responsibility to protect the organization from failure. Let’s review some of the questions and actions that organizational leaders should consider.

POTENTIAL ACTION ITEMS FOR THE BUSINESS:

- Preserve the top line of your business (i.e., maintain revenue).
  - Get aggressive about retaining customer accounts; as creatively as needed and with safety in mind. Consider allowing customers to pause, downgrade service, and pay in installments.
  - Consider cancelling minor debt if your customer is battling significant financial hardship. That revenue is unlikely to be captured if someone has lost their job or has had to shut down their business for an extended period of time per local government order; but telling someone that you are so sorry and to please consider that last service “on the house” would leave a lasting impression on your customer – and one that would likely result in a customer for life once they got back on their feet.
  - Consider generic products.
  - Shop around for the best gas prices
  - Review scheduling to improve route density and increase productivity for each employee.
  - Review scheduling to save gas. Example: some techs could potentially start their day directly from their house instead of driving to the branch and then heading to their first appointment.
  - Eliminate personnel when necessary. This may be a necessary and regrettable biproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic. If you need to eliminate valued personnel, try to keep in touch with them through weekly calls; preparing to re-engage them. If possible, do what you can to help them by filing for unemployment benefits on their behalf, referral letters, and keeping an eye out for employment elsewhere.
• **Drive retention and build trust** with your customers at every opportunity. Now is not the time to skimp on communication.
  - If you had a scheduling change, call the customer.
  - If an employee is no longer with the company, communicate with your customer.
  - If your admin staff is changing any billing protocol or timing, communicate with the customer.

• **Adapt your resources** to meet the business needs. If you need to scale back then do so. However, do not be afraid to grow, if possible. As an example, a month ago unemployment was at an all-time low, and many businesses struggled with finding good people, however, now, and unfortunately, a lot of good people need work at this time.

  Providing employment is an area where the pest control industry can certainly help a lot of people. To take this idea a step further, if you haven’t hired the best, then now is the time **re-evaluate your staffing**. Each and every employee plays a critical role in sustaining and growing your business.
  - If someone is habitually late, that’s a problem.
  - If someone isn’t diligent about following standard operating procedures (SOPs), that’s a problem.
  - If someone lacks good customer communication skills, that’s a problem.
  - If someone doesn’t take pride in their personal appearance or the appearance of their company property, that’s a problem.
  - And each of these problems has likely cost you in the past but was not noticeable (or less noticeable) since we weren’t facing a crisis. With more people out of work, your tolerance in these areas may be less than in the past and ironically, now may be an opportunity to increase quality in your team.

• **Today, now more than ever, financial awareness is critical.**
  - Look at your bank statements, profit and loss statements, and balance sheet weekly at this critical time.
  - Manage your cash and liquidity as much as possible.
  - Avoid debt now more than ever.
  - Focus and ensure cost discipline. As an example, buy gas at the cheapest gas station, use generic products in inventory when possible, fix equipment instead of replacing it, and so on.
  - If you have financial plans and budgets, revise them and forecast as much as possible.
  - Be real with yourself about your business and your financial position.
• **Show empathy** for your customer’s and employee’s concerns. Role playing with the technicians, administrative, and front-line employees regarding what to say to customers at the most common communication points is a potential way to help employees know how to empathize with customers. It also helps employees understand what we may sound like when we are talking with customers.

• **Employee engagement** is more critical than ever. Do your employees value their position? Do they feel appreciated by the company and their manager? Are there ways to improve in these areas? If so, now is the time to act! I know one company that has set up a table up with new safety equipment, sanitizer, paper towels, gloves, and a pre-made lunch for the technicians to take with them (Jimmy Johns, Subway, or Jersey Mike’s with a sports drink). Another example is a company sending their technician’s family a pre-made meal or pizza one night a week (not extravagant but a show of gratitude); our local restaurants are desperate for the business and delivering a prepared meal will help employees feel appreciated and valued.

• **Evaluating individual business opportunities vs. Safety Concerns.** Every business and every person must decide on the level of risk they are willing to take while working in the age of COVID-19. The federal guidance document listing “exterminators” as an essential service is exactly that—guidance. It does not require us to work. (Expand subheading “Public Works and Infrastructure Support Services” [https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce](https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce).)

In order to help you determine your risk while working in certain accounts and recommended PPE, OSHA provides guidance on Classifying Worker Exposure to SARS-CoV-2 that starts on page 18. ([https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf](https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf)).

Essential services are primarily to support the public health. If you determine that the account is within your risk tolerance, take care of your customers.

  o Reinforce your ability to supply your service with your team and customers.
  o Make sure everybody understands why you are an essential service, and exactly what the benefits and risks are to everyone involved.
  o Faith talked about pest control as an essential service extensively in [Article 1 of this series](https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf).

**CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUR STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES MANUAL**

• **Develop a written employee communication and customer communication that outlines individual responsibilities and manages expectations.**
  o Are you providing outside service only until further notice or unless a customer specifically requests inside service?
  o Should technicians be calling ahead to discuss the type of service that they will be performing and any issues a customer might be having? To open/unlock
backyard gates, arrange for any physical payments to be left on the porch or mailbox?

- Communication what additional precautions is the company taking to ensure employees and customers stay safe.
- Is the company offering different payment options?
- Something more?
- Once you’ve drafted this written communication, share it with your employees and your customers. Consider adding it to your employee manual and having employees sign off on it. Eliminate any question about whether or not your new protocols are optional – these are all mandatory changes to company SOP.

You as a business leader will need to determine what actions you take for your business, customers, and employees. We know these are trying times, both personally and from a business perspective. As you think about these Business Considerations for PCO’s, please consider the quote by six-time NBA Champion and entrepreneur, Michael Jordan, “Obstacles don’t have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.” We will continue to push digestible information out to our industry, and our intent is that you will use any or at of these considerations at your discretion.

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