



Getting in the Biz

by Rick Meehan

Vice President of Marko Janitorial Supply, www.MarkoInc.com

A few days ago I spoke with a husband and wife about “going into the cleaning business.” This is a common occurrence in our showroom.

Excited, the prospective new team asked the Number One Question within moments of arrival: “What will it cost us?” It seems logical to get an idea of how much money it might take to get started. However, there are more costs involved with the cleaning industry, – potentially business-busting costs – than just money spent on equipment and supplies.

Money should not be the biggest concern. Anyone with a few bucks can “get in the business.” Since I am a supplier to the cleaning world, you might think all I care about is selling as much equipment and detergent as possible. Not so. In fact, I try to educate my customers to make sure they completely understand what they are getting into – if they allow me the opportunity to present my case.



I’m in the cleaning supply biz for the long haul. It’s in my best interest to help my customers stay in business too so they can keep coming back for more of my products.

To meet this goal, I gently try to ensure that the entire question of costs is answered without dampening enthusiasm over starting a new venture. Unfortunately, many in the cleaning trade have an attitude. They’ve been there, done that, and know how to do it better than me, although I’ve been doing it since I was eight years old. Marko Janitorial Supply (and at one time Briter Business service division) is my family business, remember?

If a monetary investment is not the major cost of starting a cleaning company, what is? Good question. Glad I asked it for you. The major cost of any cleaning business is **time**; the next major cost is **effort**. The old adage “time is money” applies doubly to effort-intensive janitorial work. Efficiency cuts the cost of labor, saving real dollars that can be reinvested in the company, or taken out as wages. Thus, time is directly related to effort: the less time and effort required doing the job, the more money can be made – time really is money.

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The Tailoring Approach

Although my husband-wife cleaning team understood about applying effort to get the job done, it came as a surprise when I began to ask seemingly unimportant questions revolving around how they spend their time on the job. I call it the “Tailoring Approach.”

Every cleaning company is different right down to the amount of elbow grease used to achieve results. For instance, I would never hand a 64” long mop handle with a 32 oz. industrial cotton mop head to a lady that is only 5’2” tall and weighs less than a squirrel.



Once the mop absorbs over six pounds of liquid, it would work her near to death! She might injure her back and be unable to work at all. A wrong choice in a simple mop setup could actually cause this business to close!

I’ve seen this happen. Just as everyone has a unique fingerprint, so cleaning contractors have different equipment needs. Therefore, effort can become a major cost of doing business if the wrong cleaning equipment and

supplies are chosen.

A few weeks ago one of my local churches hired a contractor to strip and wax a 7200 square foot gym. This was the contractor’s first job. He offered the lowest price over others. Although he had years of experience with a local school district, he owned no equipment. So, the church let him use their 20-inch rotary floor machine, wet vacuum and mopping equipment. The church purchased the materials – over \$1000 worth of stripper, gym floor finish, stripping pads, and mops. In other words, the church was only paying labor costs to the contractor.



Witnesses claim that the job was a fiasco from the start. The contractor brought in three helpers who worked like gangbusters. Despite their best efforts it seemed that they simply could not get all the old finish off the floor. After a marathon 32 hours, day and night, the contractor and his helpers disappeared, leaving behind an unfinished mess. They had not been paid; bit off more than they could chew evidently. The church had to hire another contractor to do it all over again.

This scenario could have been a success except for a misunderstanding on the part of the new contractor concerning the amount

of time and effort it would take to do the job with the equipment at hand. With a bit of equipment tailoring and a better stripper, this contractor could have been successful.

I hear about situations like this several times each year. Time and Effort are costs not to be sneezed at, and completely beyond mere money. The fact is anyone with a few bucks, a rag, soap, and a trigger sprayer can get started in the cleaning biz, but the hard part is keeping the company going.

Matching products to the crew and the job type is paramount. Rather than searching for the cheapest products, an adjustment in buying habits needs to be considered. Since the real savings comes from reducing the amount of time and effort used to complete a cleaning job, picking equipment and materials to suit the situation would be the wise move. Sure, supply costs are important, but not nearly to the same extent.

Using the gym scenario as an example, we can easily determine how best to handle the account:

FACTS: We know the size of the gym is 7200 square feet. Our proven floor stripper covers 3600 square feet per gallon diluted according to directions. The floor finish itself covers 1200 square feet per gallon. A 175 RPM rotary scrubbing machine covers about 1500 square feet per hour when used for stripping. The church agreed to pay for the chemicals and allow the use of church-owned equipment. Cost of materials: about \$1000.

ORIGINAL ISSUE: Four men using church equipment spent a total of 32 hours stripping the 7200-square-foot gym. During this stretch one man ran the 175 RPM rotary machine while the other three used mops to sop up old wax, stripper, and water. This meant a whole lot of shuffling of fresh water. Because the procedure was unsatisfactorily slow, the contractor began to rush. Conservatively speaking, the contractor went in the hole just over \$1425 after labor costs were tallied. Remember, he was not paid in advance.

TWO-MAN SOLUTION: Since two working days were available, or 16 normal work hours, the stripping and waxing procedure needed

to be expedited. The only way to have done this would have been to rent or purchase equipment designed to handle the 7200 square foot size. Since this contractor was brand new, I suspect rental would have been the proper route to consider.

PERSON #1: This person runs a rented 20" 175 RPM Automatic Walk-Behind Scrubber (about \$100 per day). This machine will apply the stripper solution, scrub the floor, and vacuum up the liquid. A typical gym usually takes about five hours to strip this way. The machine will then be cleaned thoroughly and refilled with clear water. It can be used to rinse the floor prior to applying floor finish. This takes about two hours. I always recommend doubling the expected time in this case unforeseen issues occur. Here a two-day rental would have been appropriate. Cost: \$200.

PERSON #2: This person uses the church's smaller side-to-side machine for stripping tight areas. He also mops up wherever the larger auto-scrubber cannot fit. If any areas require more scrubbing time, he can concentrate on those areas while Person #1 continues to work the rest of the floor. For the most part, the auto-scrubber handles the major floor area.



BOTH PEOPLE: Visual inspections must be performed to insure that all old floor finish and stripping solution are completely removed from the floor. Person #1 then uses a rented Finish Applicator machine (about \$50 per day) made for large floor areas. These machines can usually lay a coat of finish in about 20 minutes on a 7200 square foot floor. The labor time to lay finish on the gym would be about an hour, although drying time must be included.

Classifieds: Products & Services

Most finishes will dry in 30 minutes, so that's another 1.5 hours. So, total labor time for applying finish is about 2.5 hours. Person #2 acts as a spotter in case streaks or missed spots occur. He or she also uses smaller tools like a mop or 18" wax applicator to catch tight areas or minor misses. Cost: \$50 rental.

TOTAL JOB COST: Assuming a high labor salary of \$15.63/hour for both workers, and a total number of hours in this scenario of 8.5 hours, that's \$265.71. Add in the cost of rental machines and you get \$515.71, the contractor's cost of labor and equipment. I always add in 10% overage just in case of unforeseen material usage, so the final job cost of labor and equipment would be about \$567.28. Add in the church's material purchase of about \$1000 and you get \$1567.28. Divide \$1567.28 by the square footage of 7200 and the cost per square foot to totally strip and refinish the gym is just under 22 cents. Research shows that this type of job brings between 18 and 26 cents per square foot, so this would have been a good estimate.

Creating a job cost analysis like this one is perhaps the most important way a cleaning contractor has of predicting what should be quoted for a job. Note that it is imperative to match the equipment to the job. The job includes the labor force. In the above scenario, we cut two laborers, paid a high hourly rate, and brought in the completed job in less time that allotted. Of course, all this may seem like fiction; therefore, I challenge you to do the figures yourself. You'll find that Time really is Money – and you can make more of both.

One more thing to consider when it comes to cutting time and effort is that a good janitorial supply company can be your greatest ally. Folks like me that back our products with our reputation are good resources on time studies, especially concerning machinery, equipment, and detergents. I leave the labor to you, since that's a personal question. When you walk in the door, refrain from asking how much it will cost to get in the biz. Instead, prepare the details of your envisioned company by creating a business plan so when you do visit your janitorial supply company you may ask, "How can I reduce my costs of cleaning?"

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