

Cold Weather Fleet Washing

Guidance from 20-Year Fleet Washing
Veteran Paul Kassander,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin



Photo courtesy of Mobi-Clean,
www.MobiCleanInc.com

“Always show up when you say you’re going to show up.” This is the number one piece of advice that Paul Kassander gives contractors interested in the fleet washing industry, and it’s a principle that has served him well for over 20 years as owner of Mobi Clean, Inc., as well as PowerWashStore.com.

“Even if you don’t do the best job every time, or if your equipment is acting up, show up and do whatever it takes to get them cleaned as best you can, even if it’s just getting the windows cleaned so their drivers can see better,” Kassander explained. “Customers respect and appreciate that because they are so used to companies that do a really great job the first time they clean, do a so-so job the next time, then they don’t show up at all.

Kassander practices what he preaches, which is not always easy living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where winter’s daylight temps generally stay below freezing and the average annual snowfall is over 50 inches.

In the coldest settings, he has to sometimes make exceptions – but it’s rare, and he lets the

customers know, then arrives on site as soon as weather allows. In general, Kassander says he tries not to wash if temperatures fall below 28 degrees.

“If it’s too cold, we don’t wash. It’s not that we can’t get the vehicles clean, but the hazards in the parking lots are pretty dangerous for slips/falls,” he said. “It gets to a point where the amount of things you have to do to keep that from happening outweigh the benefit of doing the work.”

There are situations where his customers need certain types of trailers cleaned no matter what, and his crews are there to take care of them. “I’ve never cleaned when it was 20 below, but I have done it in five degrees.”

Other elements, such as sunshine and wind, can also impact his 28-degree guideline. “If it’s a sunny day that is not windy, we can wash down to about 20 degrees and actually still clean pretty well without creating a bad ice situation,” he explained. “Even though it may freeze on contact, it’s amazing what the sun will do.

The side that’s in the sun won’t freeze. The side that’s not in the sun will freeze instantly.”

Keeping Everyone Safe

Kassander’s top priority is to keep his customers and his employees safe, especially when dealing with cold, often icy conditions.

One of the biggest safety issues is that pressure washing creates ice on the ground. Kassander doesn’t want the truck drivers – or his employees – slipping and falling and potentially injuring themselves. So his crews carry bags of salt to place on the ground after the cleaning. (Some customers don’t allow salt, in which case he switches to sand.) “We don’t want our customers to have to worry about the liability and worker’s comp problems that can occur from slipping on the ice,” he stressed.

As for his workers, they typically “get traction fine” on their first cleaning pass. However, by pass number two there may be ice, so again they put down salt. They also wear winter boots for extra warmth and traction.

While his crews are used to working under

these conditions, occasional falls do happen. That's why Kassander stresses the importance of teaching his team how to properly fall to minimize injury. "They know if they are slipping and falling, they need to throw the wand away from them," he explained. "If they use it or try to catch themselves with it, there can be situations where it breaks off and they can

impale themselves with it."

He also stresses safety when it comes to what his crew members wear. Typically, they dress in insulated coveralls and sweatshirts. For gloves, he's found that insulated leather gloves are better and less expensive than rubber-coated gloves. "When people use those rubber coated gloves, they get so stinky that



Paul Kassander: Owner of Mobi-Clean, Inc. & PowerWashStore.com

Paul Kassander got into pressure washing over 20 years ago. A military veteran, Kassander was working as a movie theater manager when one of his battle buddies got into the car detailing business

– and was making over twice as much in a single job as Kassander was in a day.

So he bought an "overpriced how-to-start-a-pressure-washing-business book" – which he quickly threw in the trash. Then he bought out a small pressure washing business, van and all, along with its accounts.

However, he quickly learned two important things. First, he didn't like the van setup. "I couldn't haul a lot of water to the jobs. Also, with the machine inside the van, it always smelled like exhaust even though it was vented." Second, and more significantly, he didn't have the patience for car detailing.

The business he bought had a number of fleet washing accounts, however, and Kassander enjoyed those. "When you start, the truck is dirty. When you're finished, it's clean," he said. "You can do it fast and there's instant gratification."

He fiddled with his business part-time for about two years, working at the movie theater during the day and evenings, going home and getting three or four hours of sleep, then washing fleets in the wee hours of the morning. While he enjoyed washing and he was making good money at it, the idea of quitting a secure job with insurance and benefits was a bit scary. By 1992, he took the leap and his fleet washing business "exploded."

As the business has grown, Kassander's

days out in the field have lessened, although he usually has to go out and wash most weekends during the cold season.

About two years ago, he also opened PowerWashStore.com, a national distributorship that works primarily with contract cleaners – something he really enjoys.

As a contractor, he was always trying to come up with new ideas on how to do things better, and has tried out some "pretty elaborate" ideas. Now, as a distributor, he gets to do the same kind of thing, only with new ideas coming from contractors around the country. "Contractors come up with ideas and we work with them to develop and implement them," he said. "If there's not something we can find that will help them, then we try to build something."

He stressed that he finds that is also one of the biggest benefits for participating in trade associations and various events, not just as a distributor, but as a contractor himself. "The networking and ideas that are sparked when just sitting around and talking, you come up with ideas that can revolutionize your business," he said. "Contractors getting involved and going to these events has really impacted the industry and grown it over the past few years."

Finally, he adds that he would like to see more contractors and distributors working together to create better ways of doing things. "Contractors and distributors need to stop being afraid of each other and instead work together to professionalize and increase the industry standards so everyone can make more money."

you can't keep them in the truck any more." His team usually keeps a couple of pairs of leather gloves on hand so they can swap wet gloves for dry ones between jobs, then let the wet ones dry out on the dash.

Of course, they also wear winter hats. "And we use face shields too. When that water shoots back on your face, even if it's 35 degrees outside it might feel like it's seven below. You'll ice up and freeze."

Just as it's important to be warm during the cleaning, it's important between jobs to stay comfortable. "You either need to remove your coveralls between jobs or at least undo them so you can allow airflow in," he added. "Just like if you're surviving in the wild, don't overheat yourself working outside. Once you start sweating, your body starts cooling down and you get cold. Once you're cold, you're slow the rest of the day."

In addition to the obvious safety aspects of cleaning fleets in the cold, Kassander brought up another very important point. In the winter, the vehicles are plugged into a wall because they have block heaters to keep them from freezing. While the plugs are supposed to be watertight, "If you spray those plugs with

water – especially with the salt residue and the chemicals running through them – you can short out these trucks and actually catch the trucks on fire," he explained. The plugs are supposed to be on ground fault interrupters, but if a contractor trips the ground fault and doesn't know it, the heater will turn off and the driver won't be able to start his truck in the morning.

"It's a good idea to always unplug those cords and move them to an out-of-the-way area where you're not going to get them wet," he added. "Then make sure you plug them back in." And when you plug them in, do it carefully by wearing an insulated glove and making sure you aren't standing in a puddle of water.

In fact, Kassander suggests unplugging the wires at the wall. "Then if it trips a breaker when I plug them back in, I know that water got into that plug and I need to take the plug off the truck, dry it, and check it. Hit the reset and try again."

Keeping Water from Freezing

While safety is the top concern for washing in the cold, low temperatures also cause some issues with the equipment and chemicals. First and foremost is the need to keep the water



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from freezing.

Most of Kassander's trucks are enclosed – which helps keep heat in – and they are parked inside at night, which means he doesn't have to winterize every night. If the temperature is above 28 degrees, he can usually get to any jobsite without worrying about anything freezing in the box.

He does have a couple of exposed rigs, however, which require extra precautions to keep water from freezing. (He sometimes has to take these precautions for the enclosed equipment as well if the temperature is lower than 25.)

One method Kassander uses is to add a bulkhead fitting on top of the water tank – “the way my tank is designed, I mounted one that screws into the cap” – then attach a nozzle. “Not a high pressure nozzle, but one low enough that the pressure is reduced and it will not suck soap from a downstream injector.” Next he takes his high pressure hose, quick connects it to the nozzle mounted on the tank and starts up his machine and runs it. “As long as the water is moving, it's not going to freeze in the equipment or in the tank or in the pickup line.”

Anything that spills in the truck bed will freeze, but the equipment should be ok. “I've gotten to jobsites and had two-foot icicles hanging off my truck, but my equipment is not frozen.” He adds that it's ok to turn your machine off for a minute or two without it

freezing to change things back for operation.

In cases where he's traveling long distances and doesn't want to leave his equipment running the whole way, he uses a different method. First he drains the water tanks. Next he fills a separate smaller tank full of antifreeze, closes off the water tank and opens up the tank for the antifreeze (using a ball valve), starts the machine up, and sprays the water out. “Let up on the trigger for a second to allow it to winterize the bypass line. Then squeeze the trigger again and spray until you see the antifreeze come out. At this point everything is winterized and you don't have to worry about it freezing.” When he gets to the next jobsite, he closes the antifreeze tank off, opens up the water tank, fills it with water, starts up the machine, squirts the antifreeze back into the smaller tank, which can be reused, until he sees clear water coming out, “and now I know I'm ready to wash.”

Changing Cleaning Methodology

In cold weather, fleet owners typically don't expect the same quality of cleaning/ brightening that they are accustomed to in warmer months. “Their big concerns in the winter are getting the big salt and dirt off, giving the truck a decent clean, and making it easier for the drivers to see out of the window.”

So, when it's really cold, Kassander usually only uses a single step method – i.e., soaping and rinsing. “When it's below freezing, brushing is not a possibility because the brushes freeze instantly. And the customers understand this.” If a warm spell hits, however, Kassander will implement two-step cleaning.

Additionally, the colder it is, the less effective chemicals are, so Kassander says he mixes his chemicals “a bit stronger” than he does in the summer. “However, the salt on the vehicles actually helps the cleaning process. So, you don't have to go too strong. Spring and fall are really the times to up the concentrations.”

Another problem for temperatures below freezing is that when you apply your detergent on the surface, it will almost always freeze right away. And, if there's a layer of ice on the surface already, then the chemical reacts to the ice, not the dirt below it so those areas may need to be cleaned twice or you will have to

melt the ice off the surface first.

Cold temperatures also require special care when cleaning, and some areas need to be avoided. For example, some people will tape over the locks to avoid freezing them with water. (Kassander doesn't do this personally.) Door seals are another problem in that the water can freeze the doors shut even if they are unlocked.

At the beginning of the season, Kassander will leave lock deicer with his customers just in case a driver can't get his doors open. He's never had a complaint, but the deicer creates good will nonetheless.

A very important area to avoid are the glad handles on a tractor and trailer – which is where they connect the airlines. “You can actually freeze the brake lines if water gets in them.” One of Kassander's clients also requires that they don't spray the back rims in temperatures below 15 degrees because it can cause the brakes to freeze up.

In some instances, the contractors are actually blasting off snow, for which high flow machines are good, and heat is a necessity. Kassander adds that with some areas that accumulate a lot of snow, such as the

mudflaps, it's easier just to kick the flap rather than spray it; the snow will fall right off.

Kassander warns about getting too aggressive on areas where snow and ice has accumulated, and says to avoid trying to cut it with the nozzle. “What's the snow collecting on? It's collecting on a wire. A hose. A piece of metal. If you start cutting through an area covered with snow and it turns out to be a plastic brake line, then you've created a problem.” Instead, he tries to “melt it off from a distance.”

In fact, Kassander's advice for all of these issues is to back off your distance and pressure. “You're not dealing with bugs so you don't have to be as aggressive. Let the detergents do more of the work.”

Work Smart

These are some of the many challenges that cold weather fleet washing entails, but it's an industry where cleaning cannot stop simply because it's cold outside. Remember to work safely, keep your equipment in good shape by practicing smart winter techniques, and work less aggressively. Then you should be able to follow Kassander's advice and show up when



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