

## 1 Marketing your small cleaning service

People frequently ask me the best way to get window cleaning jobs. This is a pretty broad question because there are a lot of variables to plug into it. For instance, are you trying to get window cleaning jobs in a shopping center? Or do you want to do windows for homeowners? And how much money are you trying to make? The answer to that question will exclude large parts of your town if they cannot afford you.

Before you start looking for work, you need to have a well defined idea of what you are trying to accomplish. If you just ride into town and start cleaning store fronts, this will set you into a particular rut if you are not careful. You need to know exactly what you want before you start, and before you can do that, it would be a good idea to know what is available.

This book deals with the window cleaning business as it is operated by an individual. Employees will not be a factor. Heavy equipment and hi-rise gear are not discussed. The window cleaning business we are talking about here is one that can be started for a few hundred dollars.

If you are reasonably healthy, willing to work hard, talk to people and keep records, you should be able to make a living as a self-employed window cleaner. Regardless of your race, color, sex, or religion, you can be successful.

But this book is primarily about marketing, and that covers the processes that help you provide your service to people who want it at a price that is agreeable to you: pricing, advertising, selling, networking, and distribution.

We will begin by discussing the various markets for your window cleaning service.

## 2 The Market for Window Cleaning

1. Route sales. This is where I got my start. I literally hit the streets of Gainesville with a bucket, soaper and squeegee on a stick and walked from store front to store front. I pitched my service and how often I came. If they said yes, I would come back every 2 or 4 weeks. I developed a route of steady customers on which I knew where I would be every other Monday, etc. These included fast food and larger restaurants.
2. Residential sales. These jobs are less frequent, and scheduled at the customer's convenience. They pay much better than route sales, but you take a longer time building up a client list. There are also more hazards in homes, since there are more breakables near the windows, and there are many kinds of windows, which makes the time less predictable.
3. Post-construction. Cleaning windows for building contractors after they are finished building a house. These are very hard work. There is always a lot of scraping (paint, varnish, plaster, etc.) and contractors can expect you to re-do windows after other sub-contractors have messed them up behind you. You need extra insurance for these jobs (at least in Florida you do) and it can take longer to get paid than if you are working for a homeowner. You are also at the mercy of the housing market.
4. Sub-contracting. Other cleaning services usually hate to clean windows, and are willing to pay sub-contractors. Realtors and property manager also pay outside contractors sometime.
5. Commercial Buildings. These are very similar to residential in that they get done when they feel like it. The widows can be varied, as they are in homes. I don't have very many of these, but I wish I had more of them. It's just hard to get to the decision maker. But if you do, they are gateway to residential cleaning for the people who work there.

One person's business can encompass all of these types of window cleaning. That is why I will cover all of them in this book. The area where I have the least experience is post-construction. Personally, I think that post-construction window cleaning is best done as a part of a total post-construction cleaning package by a full service cleaning service.

### 3 Marketing Window Cleaning as Part of a Route

This is where you are most likely to make immediate sales and quick cash. You will also need the least equipment. That's part of what makes this market so tough and competitive. Anybody can get started and undercut you. Since these are usually quick jobs where you are in and out, you don't develop much of a relationship with clients. That means you can find out you have been replaced by another window cleaner just because an assistant manager hired someone who just showed up ahead of you. He might not even have known that his store had a window cleaner.

This is not to say that you can't have a loyal customer on a route. It's just that it's usually the owner who hires you and sees you every week. That means it's a pretty small account. And you can't afford to get chatty when you are getting so little for your time.

Stores that are owner-operated are the most likely customers to pay cash. They will want a receipt, and you may be required by law to collect sales tax. Check with your State Department of Revenue and local municipalities about this. If you are not set up as a corporation or some other business entity, the owner may ask you to fill out a 1099 form since you are an independent contractor.

Stores that are part of a chain, or are held by a local franchisee will probably insist on being billed. The good news about this is that such stores are least likely to replace you for spurious or any other reasons. You can even skip them entirely for great lengths of time without anyone, who matters, noticing. I am not encouraging this, but you may solicit some corporate accounts that are obviously dirty, and they will tell you, "We already have someone."

## 4 Pricing Route Cleaning Jobs

These are the jobs I did when I first got started in this business. I was destitute and anxious to bring home something. I decided to price my jobs so I could work "cheap and often," as I used to say. This was a big mistake.

I was so desperate to get people to say "yes" that I was charging \$1 per pane for the outside windows, and giving a quantity discount if you had 6 or more. I did the inside of the door for free. That usually meant having to remove a sign that was attached with suction cups and scraping tape from other signs, posters, and notes. This kind of time adds up.

It seemed like a good idea at the time, but after I started doing houses I began to resent these customers because my commitment to them kept me from more profitable jobs. When I went to a house, I got out my stuff and would be there for hours. When running the route, I would be in and out of my car many times during the day. I was giving away my drive time, the time it took to get a parking place, walk to the job, and find a water source.

After going to this much trouble, I might hear the owner say, "We're gonna skip it this time. Somebody egged the window this weekend and we did them ourselves." I had no corporate accounts that I billed back then, so this was not an uncommon occurrence.

So, how much do you charge? Start high. Try \$2.00 per window on the outside, plus \$5.00 per visit. (That would make a storefront with 8 windows and 2 doors a \$25 per visit job.) Frankly, I think this is outrageous, and the customer should go pale and blurt out what she paid the last service. After having this experience at several stores, you will have an idea what the market will bear. If the prospect accepts your price, you are doing well. But things are not always that cut and dried. It's not always "yes" or "no".

## 5 Responding to Objections About Price

I don't negotiate. I know my prices are reasonable. They may even be less than reasonable. I believe it is unfair to my good customers, who pay my rates, to give price breaks to ornery cheapskates who will probably not get done very often anyway.

Memorize that last paragraph. Internalize it. Believe in it. Just don't say it. At least, not that last part about ornery cheapskates.

What follows are some actual conversations I have had with those who don't want to pay my price.

Don: That'll be \$100 inside and out.

Mr. Scrooge: (Screwing up his face) Is that a good price?

Don: It depends. If it's a good price for me, but not you, that isn't fair. If it's a good price for you, but not me, I don't need to be here. I believe there is a price that is good for both of us, and this is it.

Mr. Scrooge: Just go do it.

Don: That'll be \$180 for all the outside windows.

Mr. Tight: I'll give you \$150.

Don: It's still \$180.

Mr. Tight: How about \$160?

Don: I am charging you the same rates I charge everyone else.

Mr. Tight: You can't blame me for trying. Go ahead and do it.

Don: That'll be \$280 for all the windows, inside and out.

Dr. Paylittle: Ouch! That's a lot of money for window cleaning.

Don: That's a lot of windows. And it's less than your electric bill.

Dr. Paylittle: True. Go ahead and do it.

Don: That'll be \$35.

Mr. Chisel: The last guy did it for \$15!

Don: That last guy stopped coming because he couldn't make a living at \$15 per visit. I need to make a living.

Most of those examples come from my residential jobs, where people take price more personally. I also take prices personally. And it irks me when someone tries to make my prices a moral issue when I am living at a much lower standard of living than he or she is. At storefront or restaurant jobs, however, hourly employees may take umbrage at their perception that you are making a killing. Here's an example where I didn't get the job.

Don: Why did you replace me? I cost less than the new guy. He charges \$10 per visit and I charge \$7.

Bertha: He takes an hour to do it. You only take 20 minutes.

Don: Does he do a better job?

Bertha: No. I just don't pay anybody \$21 dollars an hour.

Things like this cannot be helped. If a customer wants to purposely prevent you from making what you need to make a living, you don't need her. You don't have to have every job; especially if they keep you from higher paying jobs.

It is important that you can justify your prices to yourself and to your customers. You should never be ashamed of what you charge. And that means you should not let people shame you out of what you have asked for. If they cannot afford you, that is an altogether different matter. They should not be ashamed of that, either. And you should not let yourself feel superior if they cannot. After all, I am sure there are a lot of things you do around your own home because you cannot afford a plumber, appliance repair man, electrician, auto mechanic, house painter, etc.

This is why I prefer to do business with people who are far better off than I am; who have more disposable income; who have bigger houses with more windows. I clean their windows so they can use their time for other pursuits, and I get paid for it.

Before moving on to residential business, though, I think I should give you some more tips on getting route jobs.

## 7 Getting Jobs for Your Window Cleaning Route

One of the biggest advantages that these relatively small jobs have over those big, lucrative houses is access. You can canvass places of business, but if you try that in a gated community, you may get arrested. Yes, I know that some stores have "no soliciting" signs in their windows, but the enforcement is so selective that I haven't figured out who they are really trying to avoid. Maybe it's panhandlers. I always walked right past it, made an offer, and either got the job or didn't. I never, ever, even once, got a reprimand for ignoring the sign.

Of course, there is a right and wrong way to do everything. Here is the wrong way. I saw this performance in a repair shop with very dirty windows.

Doofus: Got any work?

Businessman: What can you do?

Doofus: Anything.

Businessman: Uh, no thanks.

Doofus: Alright (exit stage left)

What went wrong here? The Doofus did not offer to solve a problem. He was a problem. He needed someone to tell him what to do, and the businessman already had his hands full. I got the same guy to let me clean his windows because I offered a solution. I just needed to get paid.

Don: Clean your outside windows for \$6? I'm here once a month.

Businessman: OK. Go for it.

I always went where they had a problem with dirty windows. If the windows were clean, I didn't even bother them. If they were dirty, I offered to clean them for a price. After that, it was just a matter of going to enough stores and asking enough bosses to get enough jobs.

Of course, sometimes I would go in and ask, and they would tell me they already had someone...

## 8 Challenging Inferior Service

I hate it when people get paid for NOT cleaning windows. This situation usually arises when the window cleaning is a part of a bigger cleaning contract. It's like this...

Don: I'll clean your windows inside and out for \$135.

Bureaucrat: We already have a service.

Don: But they aren't cleaning them.

Bureaucrat: But it's part of the contract. (conversation ends)

I am not making this up. This really happens. Highly educated people look at me and give me that lame excuse with a straight face.

There was an IBM office building in Gainesville many years ago. Their windows were so dirty, it could be seen from the road. I stopped in and left my card with the receptionist every year for four years. Each time I was told they already had someone under contract, even though the windows were NEVER cleaned. In the fifth year, I asked to see the biggest boss who was available. She summoned him and I waited in the waiting room. After awhile, an important looking executive came out to see me. After getting up and introducing myself, I said this:

"I have been driving past your building several times a week for the past five years. I stop in once a year to offer my services to clean the windows, but I am told that someone else has the contract to do them. However, after five years they are five years dirtier. They have never been done. This is my offer. I don't know how much they are charging you to NOT clean your windows, but I will NOT clean them for less! In fact, I will NOT clean all the windows in this building for \$5!"

Without any emotion, he thanked me, took my card, and left the room. The next day, I drove past the building and saw two inexperienced goofballs on step ladders inefficiently cleaning the windows with paper towels and spray cleaners. I didn't get the job, but I felt IMMENSE satisfaction!

What is more satisfying is getting the job. What I should have done was what worked at a big car dealership in town. I walked up with my equipment and cleaned the window next to the dirtiest window. Then I asked to see the manager.

When the boss came out, I offered to clean the windows for a price. He told me they already had someone. I pointed out the window I cleaned, and said, "I just cleaned that window. I will make the rest of your showroom look like that if you hire me. If you don't hire me, you can tell your current service that they have to match THAT one."

I got the job, and did it for many years.

Cleaning windows in public places has its advantages. You are able to pitch prospective customers with impunity, and you get to display your work in public. It pays to have business cards on hand. Feel free to leave them in the waiting rooms where your work can be seen.

You can also see how dirty the windows are, and judge for yourself how grateful they would be to you for cleaning them. If they have another service that is getting away with neglect, do try to get their business. But do not waste too much time on it. They may have known the cleaner for years and take it personally that you are disparaging his or her work.

Don't quiz them about price, either. You don't want to undercut another window cleaner. Just leave your card and invite them to call you if he stops coming by. Be nice. If he's cheaper, he may stop doing them after getting a better paying job.

If you lose a job to an undercutter, stay in touch with your old customer. When the cheap guy stops coming, keep in mind that he could not afford to stay in business at his rates. Share this insight with your customer, but do it tactfully.

## 10 Getting Started in Route Sales

If you are ready to take the plunge, you will need the following to get off to a good start...

1. Equipment: a soaper, a squeegee with extra blades, a good scraper that can go on a pole, extra razor blades, a bucket, some towels (paper or cloth) a telescoping pole. When I first got in the business, this was all I had for awhile. I worked off the back of my motorcycle for at least 8 months.
2. Business cards. There will be plenty of times when you cannot reach a decision maker. Make sure that person can reach you.
3. A cell phone. This number should be on your card. When you get a call, you need to be able to respond immediately.
4. Sales pads, stamped with your contact information. They will want a receipt, and it must be official.
5. A business bank account.
6. A business name. Businesses don't like to do paid outs to individuals. They will want you to fill out a 1099 form, and this is a nuisance to them at tax time. You suffer the inconvenience for them by getting a "DBA" from your state or local government authorities. (My corporation, MFI, Inc., had to get a "Doing Business As" name to take checks made out to Marsh Window Cleaning.) Check the rules in your state or ask your banker.
7. A bookkeeping system. We used a simple "Dome" book for years. Dome is a brand name that can be found in your local CVS, Walgreens, or Wal-mart. If you just take cash under the table, it's too easy for you to get caught nowadays. Your customer will want a receipt. If he gets audited, this receipt is a paper trail back to you. If you have not declared this income, the IRS can find out easily enough by checking your tax returns in THEIR files. A bookkeeping system helps you to give an account for your income.
8. A contact list. Keep track of your customers! Don't rely on your memory. There will be times when you need to call them to adjust their schedule or tell them you are running late.

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living as a self-employed contractor at:  
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anyone you think might benefit from it. Whether that person is in  
need of an opportunity to make a good living, or even if this business  
would make a good addition to an existing cleaning service, I believe  
the content is valuable for those purposes.

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