



13 Secrets for Making Your Cleaning Business a Success

Nothing teaches as well as the voice of experience. So we asked established cleaning service owners to tell us what's contributed to their success and what they think causes some companies to fail. Here are their tips:

1. Never stop learning. The cleaning industry may not be the most glamorous or complex, but established business owners say there's always something to learn. Technology advances affect the equipment you use, safety issues affect the chemicals you clean with, and there will always be ways you can enhance your organizational and managerial skills. Read industry publications, go to meetings and conventions, participate in trade organizations, and encourage your suppliers to keep you up to date.

2. Tap all your resources. A wide range of associations serves various aspects of the professional cleaning industry. These groups can help with operational, marketing and management issues. Many state and government agencies also offer support and information for small businesses.

3. Clean it like it's your own. Regardless of what you're cleaning and whether you're doing traditional housecleaning, janitorial work, or providing a specialty cleaning service, clean like you're cleaning your own home or office.

4. Develop systems. Systems provide a structure that allows you to work consistently and efficiently, and also let you create a company that will continue to run whether you're there or not. Create systems for every function: cleaning, laundry, supervision, reporting, customer service, accounting and management.

5. Be careful! Though time is your most valuable commodity, don't rush so much that you get careless. Customers will usually understand when accidents happen, but you're better off if you don't have to fall back on that. Also, the cost to repair or replace something--in out-of-pocket cash, time lost and damaged customer relations--is usually far more than the time you might save by working carelessly.

6. Don't undersell yourself. When you're starting out, you may be tempted to try to undercut the competition's prices. A better strategy is to simply outperform them by providing quality work.

7. Take care of your employees. Your employees are critical to your success; after all, it's the quality of their performance that determines whether your customers are satisfied. Look for ways to make them want to do their best. Train them well, don't micromanage, and treat them with respect. Provide bonuses and incentives for top performance, and consider offering perks such as letting them use company equipment in their own homes.

8. Find a niche. Don't try to be all things to all people; pick the market you can best serve, and focus on that. For example, if you choose to service smaller office buildings, you may not be able to provide quality work at a profitable

price level to larger facilities. Excel in what you're doing and build consistency in the services you provide. When you try to serve too many markets, you won't be successful in any of them.

9. Develop your computer skills. You need to be as skilled with your computer as you are with a mop or buffer. The cleaning business may not be particularly high tech, but you don't have time to do estimates, billing, payroll, inventory control and other record-keeping by hand.

10. Track labor costs. The biggest single expense you have is labor, and you must stay on top of it. If you aren't watching your labor costs every day, they'll get away from you. Compile a daily over and under report, which makes it easy to spot trends before they become major issues. If labor is on the increase, figure out where the problem is. Is the customer asking for extra services you aren't charging for? Did you underestimate the time it would take to do the work? If you're under on your labor estimates, make sure your employees are providing the quality you've promised.

11. Invest in customer service. The quality of your cleaning is important, but it's not everything. Building strong relationships with your clients requires a serious commitment to customer service. Don't assume that just because the work looks satisfactory to you that it is to your customers--or that there's nothing else they want or need. Be sure to follow up with them consistently to find out how things are going.

12. Keep your eye on the economy. As long as things get dirty, there'll be a need for professionals to clean them. But economic changes can mean changes in your market. Residential cleaning services, for example, are often seen as luxuries, and an economic downturn could affect your customers' willingness and ability to pay to have their homes cleaned. When business profits shrink,

companies look for ways to cut expenses, which means they may examine their budgets for services that can be reduced or eliminated.

Also consider how the world economy can impact your profitability. If oil prices skyrocket, you'll have to spend more to operate your vehicles, and your general utility costs will probably increase. When the cost of lumber goes up, so does the cost of bathroom tissue, paper towels and other disposable paper products you provide to your customers. You may be able to pass along some of those costs, but don't depend on a thriving economy to keep your business profitable. Have plans in place so you can shift your market focus if necessary.

13. Don't take every job. If you can't make money on a job, or if the work is undesirable for any reason, turn it down. It's better to focus your time and energy on profitable work you enjoy.



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