

Why Restrooms and Floors Should be a Strategic Focus for Distributors

By: Robert Robinson, Sr.

The best of times;
the worst of times

Face it; the business challenges facing Jan-San distributors today aren't going away anytime soon...if ever. Widespread consolidation, cold-blooded competition and evaporating margins have become a fact of life for today's distributor. What's worse, the current slowdown is throwing gasoline on an already scorching fire. If you haven't felt the heat yet, just wait.

In the midst of this commotion, too many distributors simply come to work every morning, look over their warehouses filled with 2000-some items and wonder what they'll sell that day. Their only plan is to keep their warehouses stocked with what they think some customers might want to buy. After all, it's gotten them this far, hasn't it? They only hope they can hunker down long enough to outlast the storm. Without a doubt, to them, the current business climate represents the worst of times.

There's another breed of distributor, though, that views the current environment as an opportunity. They see this as a prime time to aggressively steal new business and market share from the unprepared. They've discovered that proactively executing a well-thought-out business strategy empowers them to win new customers while keeping and growing their existing ones. These winners are thriving in today's market. For them, this is the best of times.

Like all market leaders, they've also discovered that a true market-driven strategy is founded on customer need. If you ask them, they'll almost certainly tell you that a key to their success is focusing on the biggest problems plaguing their customers. For most distributors in the Jan-San arena, regardless of their target market, this translates into restrooms and floor care.

Why Focus on
Restrooms?

Ask any facility manager to name the biggest source of building complaints, and you'll likely hear that it's



the restroom. In fact, according to the 2001 CM in-house survey, “the number one building maintenance complaint is dirty, stinking restrooms.” No matter what type of facility, whether a school, stadium, airport, theater, restaurant, mall, whatever, the public restrooms are typically a disgrace. And facility managers hear it day after day — from patrons, employees *and bosses*.

Beyond being the source of constant complaints, restrooms also represent a sizeable portion of a facility’s maintenance budget. Helping customers solve this persistent problem *and* reduce their labor costs at the same time will go a long way towards solidifying your relationship with them. “Even in a tight economy customers will invest in efficient solutions that help them reduce labor and save money. We’ve made great inroads into the school market by showing customers how no-touch cleaning equipment not only helps them eliminate restroom complaints but also cuts the associated labor costs in half,” said David Erzen, President of Erzen Associates, a distributor located in Pittsburgh, PA. “It becomes a no-brainer,” he adds.

With roughly 60 percent of Jan-San supply purchases related to restrooms; it’s easy to see that this represents a substantial revenue stream for distributorships. Keeping your accounts supplied with cleaning solutions, towels, tissue, deodorizers, hand soap, trash bags, and more, not only drives significant revenue, but also makes you extremely visible within the account. So, locking up the restroom business means more than just repeat business; it can equate to better account control. Once entrenched, as long as you stay on your toes and keep your customers satisfied, it will be very difficult for competitors to knock you out.

Why Focus on Floors?

Perhaps the second biggest problem area in building maintenance today is floor care, for several reasons. First of all, the appearance and cleanliness of your customer’s floors can have a real impact on their business. In fact, one recent survey revealed that grocery customers often decide where they shop based on the condition of the floors. So, poor floor care can actually cost your customers real business. Secondly, laying finish on floors is problematic, and often results in such noticeable flaws as bubbles and



Developing and
Executing a Strategy

streaks. Without the right tools and methods, it seems that finishing floors still remains more an art than a science. Thirdly, floor care is very labor intensive and therefore represents a large cost to the facility. This is aggravated by the fact that improper application of finish all too often forces customers to do their floors over. Therefore, getting it right the first time provides immediate and significant benefit.

At the same time, because of sheer size and visibility, great looking floors earn your customers kudos and represent a great source of pride. Therefore, helping your customers eliminate the problems associated with floor care while simultaneously improving their efficiency will give you a distinct advantage within the account.

Additionally, locking up a floor care account provides a tremendous opportunity for ongoing equipment, chemical, supply and services business. Among other things, this includes cleaning, stripping and finishing solutions, mopping tools, auto scrubbers, floor pads for auto scrubbers, and more, with huge potential for repeat business.

Determining areas of focus, such as restrooms and floors, is a critical element in your business strategy. What are the remaining components that must be developed and executed in order to thrive in this market? They can be summarized as follows:

- Define your target market
- Become the expert in solving problems for your target
- Develop a "system" that enables you to deliver a whole solution
- Know your customer

Define your target market

Chances are your territory is made up of a variety of market segments, such as schools, hospitals, restaurants, plants, warehouses, groceries, etc., which typically have their own unique requirements and problems. Market leading distributors avoid falling into the trap of trying to be all things to all people by targeting those segments that offer the greatest opportunity first. This not only helps focus



their efforts and resources where they are more likely to win, but also results in in-depth expertise that differentiates them from competitors. It also helps develop a relevant reference base. Does this mean you shouldn't sell to anyone outside your target? Absolutely not. The target simply refers to the segment of buyers for whom you will build complete solutions and proactively market.

Become the expert in solving problems for your target.

One of the reasons that focusing is so important is that you will be more effective at winning and keeping business if you are recognized as an "expert." For example, you should have an in-depth understanding of your customers' problems and then be in a position to deliver real solutions to those problems. This also means your customer depends on you to stay on top of new advances and developments in the industry. Unfortunately, too many distributors have drifted far from the customer and their issues, but that spells opportunity for the aggressive distributor.

"By developing in-depth expertise and competency in restroom and floor care, our customers view us as their trusted advisors in these areas. This has, in turn, created a healthy dependence on us, which is great for competitive positioning," said Tom Chambers, Business Manager for Valley Janitor Supply, a distributor located in Hamilton, OH.

Develop a "system" that enables you to deliver a whole solution

If you want to become the "go-to" expert in your area for restroom and floor care, you must have the capacity to deliver a whole solution, or system. In other words, you must be able to deliver all the pieces required to fully satisfy the restroom and floor care needs of your target. In addition to a compatible mix of products, this may include training, services, repair capabilities, automatic inventory control, etc. Include strategic manufacturers and other partners in your system as needed to complete your solution.

Know your customer

Another important component of a winning strategy is customer knowledge. The more intimately you know your customer's specific situation, the better you will be able to design comprehensive floor care and restroom solutions around their needs. For example, how many buildings do they have? What materials are they made of? Do they need training? What products do they

Use Innovation to Win New Accounts

currently use? What's their budget? Are they union or non-union? And so on. If you can pull these puzzle pieces together for your customer, you will add tremendous value to their operation and will likely win their business.

Once you've developed a business strategy, how do you penetrate competitive accounts? Not by showing up at their door with a set of me-too commodity offerings. By arming yourself with new and innovative products and services, you will be able to attack competitors by offering new capabilities that aren't available elsewhere. For example, in the recent past, many distributors cracked new restroom accounts by offering no-touch dispensing. Today, aggressive distributors are knocking down doors with such new breakthroughs as no-touch cleaning and flawless waxing systems.

"A successful tactic we employ for penetrating competitive accounts is to offer to clean one of their restrooms with our no-touch cleaning system. They are often stunned to see how much cleaner we can get their restrooms in about half the time," said Paul South, Sales Manger from Valley Janitor Supply. "This has helped us increase our equipment business this year by 40 percent."

Choose Your Partners Wisely

Most market leading distributors will tell you that a key component of their plan is partnering with the right suppliers. That's because aligning with the right business partners can keep you on the cutting edge, giving you the clear advantage over your competitors. Look for partners with the right mix of products and services to help you fulfill your whole product offering. The right partners can help you fill gaps with value-added resources such as technical expertise and information, training, ancillary services, etc. In addition, aligning with a partner with a solid reputation can enhance your image within your target market.

"Picking a business partner is a very important decision. You want to make sure you team up with manufacturers that are continually pushing the envelope by discovering better ways of solving real problems," according to David Erzen.

"Being able to offer the latest innovations, such as flawless floor care, will definitely help win and keep customers," he added.



Conclusion

Even in an economic downturn, customers will invest in solutions that eliminate their problems while helping them reduce labor and save money. In fact, they'll even pay a premium. Make sure it's you they're buying from by developing and executing a winning strategy that addresses your customers' greatest needs. Restrooms and floors offer that opportunity.

About the Author

Bob Robinson, Sr. is the founder and president of Kaivac, Inc., a manufacturer of industrial cleaning equipment and chemicals based in Hamilton, Ohio. Internationally recognized for delivering innovation and quality, Kaivac, Inc. is the originator of No-Touch Cleaning. According to Robinson, "Kaivac does for the janitor what the bulldozer does for the ditch digger - moves more dirt, in less time, with pride."