Acoustics Cleaning: A Natural Sideline

Wall and Ceiling Contractors Find That Acoustical Cleaning Is A Profitable, Steady Business With Little Risk

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A growing number of wall and ceiling contractors are finding increased profits and greater versatility by supplementing their construction businesses with an acoustical ceiling cleaning division.

(Editor's Note: Gordon Hamilton is CEO of Tangible Research and Development Corp., parent company of Acoustic Clean. There are nearly 300 Acoustic Clean dealerships in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia and the Mideast.)

In fact, acoustical ceiling cleaning often goes hand in hand with wall and ceiling work—a trend that has become particularly prominent in the building renovation phase of the business. By cleaning ceilings rather than replacing them, contractors can often save hundreds or even thousands of dollars in a single restoration project.

At the same time, contractors can often add substantially to their incomes through revenues derived from a sideline acoustical ceiling cleaning operation. Full-time ceiling cleaning dealers are reporting as much as $100,000 a year with profit margins as high as 60 percent of gross.

Acoustical ceiling cleaning is a relatively new process-national companies began springing up in the late 1970s—that has proven to be a highly effective method of solving what had been a very difficult maintenance problem.

Before the development of the special chemical solutions, there had been no reliable means to clean the
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brittle, pore-filled surface of most types of acoustical ceiling tiles. Conventional cleaning and scrubbing methods caused tile to crumble, or left it spotted or stained, and painting over the tile impaired the fire retarding and acoustical qualities of the ceiling tile.

**New Process**

Thanks to some recent advances in the cleaning solutions, it is now possible to remove dirt, smoke and stains from about 95 percent of the acoustical tile ceilings in the United States. New solutions can sanitize and disinfect ceilings—a popular feature for hospitals and nursing homes.

Acoustical ceiling cleaning is not the type of business that you can start on your own. Opening an acoustical ceiling cleaning operation requires purchasing a dealership agreement with an established company that has already developed solutions, equipment and effective cleaning procedures. The cost of dealership rights is generally several thousand dollars, but the initial cost of the dealership can be quickly recouped.

Profits with an acoustical ceiling dealership can be excellent.

The average charge per job is about 25 cents per square foot, while material costs run about 3 cents per square foot. A crew of two can clean 3,000 to 7,000 square feet per day. That adds up to between $600 and $1,500 in a single day for a two-person crew.

A small construction company on the West Coast opened an acoustical ceiling dealership in 1982 to supplement the company's income and help pull it through the recessionary lag in the construction industry. They found the ceiling cleaning profits so attractive, they decided to phase out the construction end of their operation, and have turned full time to ceiling cleaning.

**High Profits . . .**

Their construction business was pulling about a 10 to 15 percent profit per job. With their acoustical ceiling cleaning venture, they are reporting about a 35 to 60 percent profit margin. And, unlike the construction business where payment for jobs often comes weeks or months after the work begins, payment for ceiling cleaning jobs is received almost immediately.

One advantage for construction contractors entering the acoustical ceiling cleaning business is an edge in prospecting. Contacts made in the construction end of your business could often lead to jobs in ceiling cleaning and vice versa.

Finding prospects for ceiling jobs is as easy as looking overhead. Acoustical ceilings are everywhere—office buildings, shopping malls, schools, banks, supermarkets, restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes, hotels and recreational centers.

About 80 percent of the buildings in the United States have a problem that needs correcting, whether it's a light soil, a heavy soil, cigarette smoke or water stains. Potential customers always want to talk to you. Studies have shown that most ceilings are painted, replaced or otherwise
treated every five years—and often at great expense to the owner.

Statistics show that about one out of every five cold sales calls result in job assignments within two weeks of the initial visit. Within a year, with proper follow-up, 75 percent of those talked to would have work done.

But, of course, finding prospects would be to no avail if you can’t deliver a price that makes the service an attractive alternative to painting or replacing soiled ceiling tiles. And, indeed you can. On the average, the rates charged for cleaning acoustical ceilings (roughly 25 cents per square foot) are as low as ten percent of the cost of replacing them and one-third to one-half the cost of a good quality painting job.

On a 10,000-square-foot ceiling, for instance, cost of cleaning would be about $2,500, while replacing the ceiling would run $7,500 to $20,000, depending on the style of the tile.

**Restoring Possible . . .**

When a contractor goes in to renovate a building, in most cases, the majority of the tile can be restored through an acoustical tile cleaning process. Six or seven years ago, they would have had to replace the tile, and, unfortunately, many contractors who are unaware of the acoustical cleaning technology are still wasting money replacing ceilings that could very easily be cleaned instead.

Contractors who use acoustical ceiling cleaning services, or, better yet, have it available as an in-house service, have a very definite edge over competitors who are bidding the jobs based on replacing all the ceiling tile.

While some acoustical cleaning processes are better than others, the best services can guarantee excellent quality. Test results released by Intest Laboratories, Inc., provide some insight. The tests involved a comparison between painting the ceilings and cleaning them with chemical cleaning solutions.

The tests showed that, unlike painting, the cleaning process restores luminosity and improves the appearance of soiled ceilings without significantly reducing sound absorbency.

Cleaning is accomplished through chemical reaction rather than agitation or pressure.

The acoustical ceiling cleaning business is constantly expanding and evolving, as we move into new areas of opportunity for our dealers.

The future of acoustical cleaning is promising, as researchers develop more effective solutions and a wider range of services. It is finally reaching the point where people are beginning to consider cleaning to be the accepted alternative to painting or replacing ceilings.

But, there is still a ways to go. I would estimate that some 80 percent of the population still doesn’t realize what can be done.

For those dealers already established in the business, the potential for growth is excellent, but within the next decade we expect a much higher level of competition. The smart money is on those who act now, and enter the business while the industry is still emerging. Acoustical ceiling cleaning is considered by some to be the last virgin territory of building maintenance.

But if the ceiling cleaning business appeals to you, don’t wait too long to stake your claim. Like all new promising enterprises, the choice opportunities will not be available for long.