

Facts about Flat-Surface Power Washing

By Terri Perrin

For someone investigating the power washing industry, flat surface cleaning may appear to be – on the surface – the easiest of all power washing applications to launch a new business enterprise.

“Not so!” says PWNA member Paul Horsley, Scotts Pressure Wash, AB, Canada. “When we talk about ‘flat surface cleaning’ we are generally referring to concrete, interlocking bricks and pavement/asphalt not wooden decks ... that’s a whole different story. And, in most cases, we are referring to industrial, commercial or multi-family residential properties, such as condominium developments.

“Providing flat surface power washing in these scenarios presents you with some of the biggest challenges because this is the one service where understanding local ordinances concerning wastewater control are of paramount importance,” adds Horsley. “There will generally *not* be a vegetative buffer to absorb wastewater and most often there *will be* a multitude of storm sewer drains that you have to be aware of. To ensure ‘nothing down the drain but rain’ you have to provide waste water recovery and disposal services.”

Flat surface cleaning for restaurants, gas stations and automotive service locations are especially challenging as the chance of producing contaminated wastewater are greatly heightened. In most cases, a combination of PSI and water temperature (without the addition of chemicals) is sufficient to clean flat surfaces, it is the surface contaminants that you are being contracted to remove that you need to be concerned about. Cleaning dumpsters, for example, will result in the removal of hydrocarbons, oils and plant/animal fats that cannot be flushed down the drains.

Horsley recalls a recent scenario where his company was asked to provide a quote on cleaning the flat surface around a dumpster at a fast food restaurant. In accordance with local bylaws, Scotts Pressure Wash’s quote contained an allowance for wastewater recover and disposal, adding under \$100 to the quote. Instead of opting for what was ‘right’ the potential customer gave the job to the lowest bidder... who advised the restaurant owner that ‘*wastewater recovery didn’t matter.*’

The end result? The splash and dash operator did a great job of cleaning out the restaurant owner’s dumpster area *and* his pocketbook! The City slapped him with a \$6,000 fine for improper disposal of contaminated wastewater. Lesson learned. (Did the power washer get a fine, too?)

“The bottom line is that you can’t transport a building, a sidewalk or a drive-thru to your shop or to a gravel parking lot for cleaning,” adds Horsley. “You have to know the municipal and federal regulations relating to wastewater management... *and* you have to follow them.”

Brian Schmalz, Ultimate Shine, NJ, agrees. “After six years in power washing industry, I continue to find that wastewater management provides the biggest challenge,” explains Schmalz. “In most flat surface cleaning scenarios I am able to get good results by using clear water at about 3500 PSI and 150° F – especially with gum removal. The combination of hot water and pressure releases the gum from the surface and disintegrates it relatively easily. Beyond that, I do use a number of chemicals... and there are always new ones being introduced to the market. I am always willing to try different chemicals when they are first introduced but I tend to stick with a few tried and true favorites.”

The good news for people considering expanding or starting a power washing service for flat surface cleaning is that it can be a very profitable year ‘round service in many geographical regions of North America. Not only do owners/managers of most commercial enterprises recognize the importance of cleaning sidewalks in order to meet health and safety regulations, they know that clean businesses

attract more customers.

If you are in a geographical regional where flat surface cleaning is seasonal, don't market your products in the spring. Use what would otherwise be down time in January through March and offer a discount to customers who pre-book spring cleaning well in advance.

It is recommended that all power wash contractors personally visit all potential job sites before providing quotes. Flat surface cleaning is no exception.

This pre-quote inspection and project evaluation enables you to provide accurate quotes and build relationships with potential customers. As importantly, it provides an opportunity to up sell additional value-added services, such as graffiti removal, awning cleaning and window cleaning. Even though the customer may have called you for a quote on simply removing gum from the sidewalk in front of the store, be sure to walk around the building and point out any other areas where your company may be of service.

When quoting flat surface cleaning, you are best advised to quote the job based on accurate measurements of linear feet of surface to be cleaned. Considering that most concrete is laid in 8- or 16-foot squares, it is usually very easy to calculate the surface area and time required to clean it. (Include set-up and take down into your quote.) Offer a written quote for the entire job, not an hourly rate. By quoting per hour, you risk losing money if your wash technicians happen to be extremely efficient and get the job completed in record time.

As a finishing touch, Horsley recommends power washers do a quick rinse of the entire area, including trash cans, mail boxes, chairs, benches, window ledges, etc. "What's the sense of presenting a clean sidewalk if all the concrete picnic benches and the main point of entrance to the building still looks dusty and dirty?" asks Horsley. "Imagine that you own the place. Ask yourself how you would want it cleaned ... then exceed your customer's expectations."

For additional information on flat surface cleaning visit the Power Washers of North America's website (www.thepwna.org) and check out their 'Best Management Practices.'

Flat Surface Cleaning Tips:

- Always start with lower water pressure (around 2000 PSI) to test the concrete's durability. Too much pressure could damage the concrete by drawing permanent lines on the surface.
- Never pressure wash brand new concrete before it has had time to cure.
- Use caution when cleaning paving stones. Don't blow the sand out from between the stones, reduce the pressure and/or back up the gun.
- Be extremely careful cleaning around the edges of a concrete slab. Landscaping, dirt, and debris can fly around from the water pressure.
- Never guarantee a stain can be removed. Explain you will do your best to remove or minimize the stained but it is better to surprise a customer with a clean patch than disappoint them with a faded stain.
- Be professional! Always wear the appropriate personal protection safety equipment – steel-toed rubber boots, safety glass, gloves, etc. – when operating power washing equipment.
- Follow your equipment manufacturer's directions with respect to distance between the spray

head and the surface -- typically 6- to-10-inches while power washing, although this varies with the PSI and spray width settings. Moving too close may damage the surface; staying too far away may be ineffective.

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