

A New Train of Thought

Pressure washing railcars and locomotives is a lucrative market

During these tough economic times, power washing companies need to “think outside the box” in order to continue to build a client base and maintain a profitable business. One long-time member of the Pressure Washers of North America (PWNA) says that we need to take that old saying one step further... and “think outside the *boxcar!*”

According to Paul Horsley, President of Scotts Pressure Wash in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, the rail industry is a large and relatively untapped niche market for the power washing industry. From degreasing locomotives, to removing graffiti from tankers, to dry sweeping boxcars, this industry provides a wealth of opportunities for power washers willing to put in a little extra effort to secure contracts.

“The rail industry in North America is much bigger than most people think and, just like other modes of transportation, railway companies need power washing services,” says Horsley. “Statistics from the Association of American Railroads show that there are more than 1.59 million freight cars and 24,143 locomotives in service throughout Canada, Mexico and the United States. You can bet a good number of those railcars travel through your state in any given day!”

If the thought of adding the rail industry to your service roster sounds daunting, relax. Much of what you already know from washing transport trucks can be applied to the rail industry. With some additional research and mentoring, working on the railroad can be an attainable and profitable goal.

“Scotts Pressure Wash has been providing services to the rail industry for over five years,” says Horsley. “When first asked if I would be interested in submitting a bid to power wash railcars, I was hesitant. At the time, the rail industry was unfamiliar territory and I wasn’t comfortable bidding on the job. However, after thinking about the pressure wash process and with confidence in my team, I submitted our bid. We won that contract, and several more since then, and we have never looked back.”

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The North American Railroad Industry

The 600+ freight railroads operating in Canada, Mexico, and the United States are vital to North America's economic health. They form a seamless integrated system that provides the world's most efficient, cost-effective freight service. North American railroads operate over 173,000 miles of track, and in 2007 earned more than \$67 billion in annual revenues.

Railroads remain the backbone of North America's freight transportation network. U.S. freight railroads are the world's busiest, moving more freight than any rail system in any other country. In fact, U.S. railroads move more than four times as much freight as all of Western Europe's freight railroads combined.

Major Class I Freight Railroads in North America

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|------|---|
| BNSF | BNSF Railway |
| CN | Canadian National Railway |
| CP | Canadian Pacific Railway |
| CSX | CSX Transportation |
| FXE | Ferrocarril Mexicano (Ferromex) |
| KCS | Kansas City Southern Railway |
| NS | Norfolk Southern |
| KCSM | Kansas City Southern de Mexico (Formerly TFM) |
| UP | Union Pacific |

Source: Association of American Railroads. Reprinted with permission.

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Before preparing a bid, it is imperative that you know the type of railcar you are being asked to clean. As importantly, you need to ask your client if there are any company-specific or industry regulations you need to be aware of.

When washing locomotives, for example, water applied under pressure to the disk brakes may cause corrosion, resulting in brake failure. Since this significant safety hazard has been identified as a major risk, the American Association of Railroads has circulated written guidelines that dictate waterproof tarps must cover the brakes before any power washing begins. Locomotives must also be cleaned after being in service for a specified number of hours. (Time may vary from state to state, company to company.)

Location is also a major consideration. Where the work will be done? Who owns the land? Are there any environmental constraints? Is there an available source of water and a place to dispose of wastewater?

“I’ll never forget the first rail contract Scotts won,” explains Horsley. “Although I did my due diligence and visited the rural site in advance, I never considered how different that site would be after a period of heavy rainfall. We only had a short window of opportunity to complete the work and, because of the rain, we incurred major difficulties getting equipment in and out of the site. To say it was a challenge to complete the job on time and on budget would be an understatement! I’ve since learned that it’s a good idea to build an extra day into the bid, to allow for unforeseen circumstances.”

Horsley says that you can expect railway industry contracts to have tight deadlines. The rail company needs to get their railcars back in service as soon as possible. It is not unreasonable to be asked to clean one unit train – consisting of 125 railcars – in three days.

“Once you get a system in place, the work goes relatively quickly,” says Horsley.

The “system” Horsley is referring to requires planning a waste water recovery procedure, trucking in water, having ready access to a lift truck (to work on top of the railcars), ensuring pressure wash units are operational and equipped with the appropriate chemicals and, of course, using the appropriate safety gear to protect workers from fall hazards and chemical overspray.

The most common chemicals used in railcar/locomotive cleaning are sulfuric acid, ammonium bifluoride and hydrofluoric acid.

Once everything is in place, the railcars need to be cleaned using a six-step process:

- 1) Two-step roof (Apply chemical wash, then rinse.)
 - 2) Two-step sides and under carriage.
 - 3) Simultaneously commence wastewater recovery.
 - 4) Graffiti removal ~ May require manual scrubbing.
 - 5) Apply degreaser (if necessary)
 - 6) Rinse entire unit, top down, including under carriage and wheels.
- Repeat. Again and again and again!

In the past, many rail companies did much of this type of work internally. Today, the majority of companies are outsourcing this part of their regular maintenance procedures and, in doing so, opening a huge window of opportunity to the power washing industry. If there was ever a time to “take the train,” this is it!

The PWNA provides a two-day workshop on train cleaning. For more information visit www.pwna.org.

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Rail-Related Cleaning Opportunities

Boxcars

Pressure wash exteriors. Dry sweep/steam interiors.

Tankers

Exterior pressure washing and graffiti removal.

Grain Hoppers

Manual removal of debris accumulated on ends decks and pressure washing.

Locomotives

Exterior pressure washing with special attention to engine compartment.

Additional Services:

Stenciling numbers and repairing hatches.

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