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## READY, SET, STARTUP!

The right planning regimen for winning over new customers ... and holding on to them



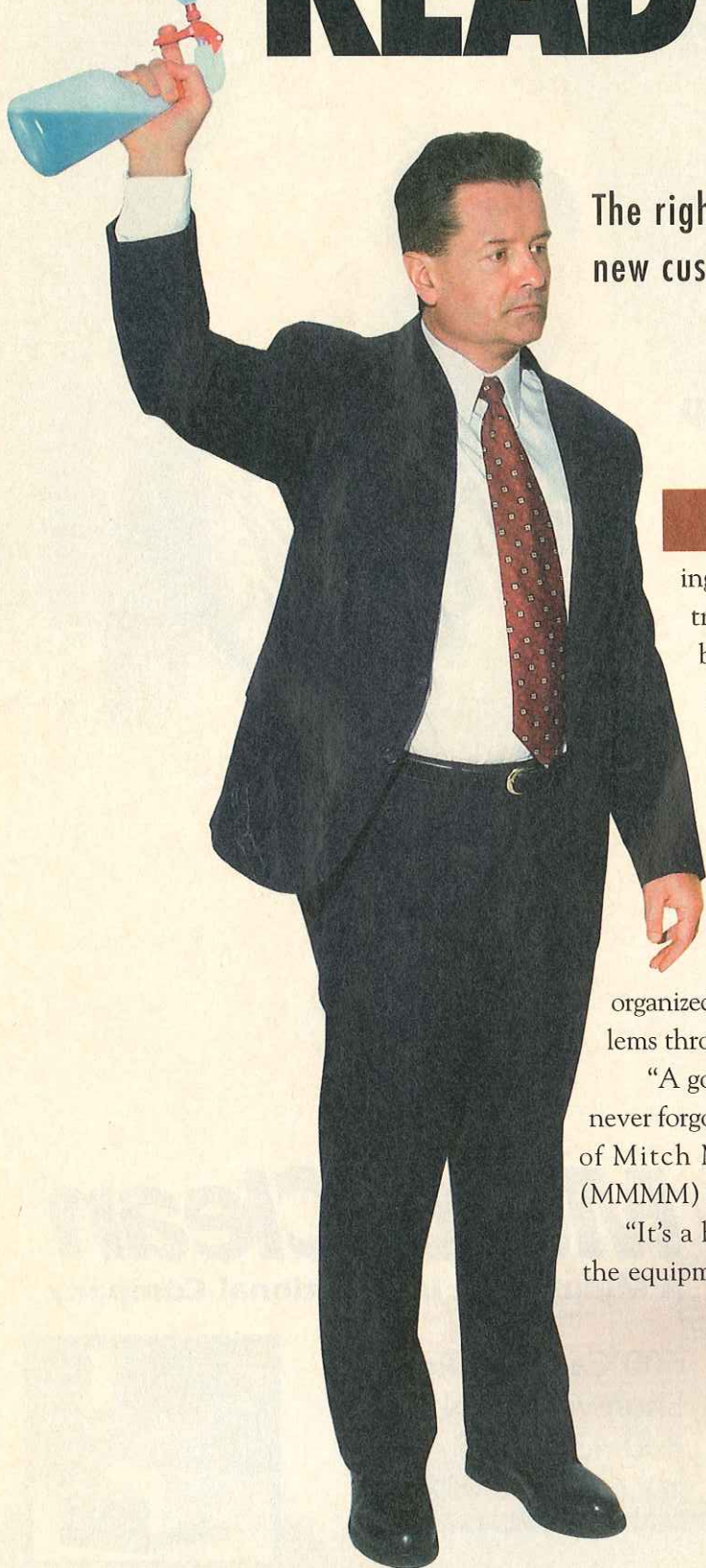
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# READY, SET...



The right planning regimen for winning over new customers ... and holding on to them

■ You've just signed and sealed the biggest account your company's ever seen, beating out several other building service contractors in the process. But what you do between now and the first few weeks on the job can make the difference between a mutually beneficial contractor-client relationship and a dissatisfied customer.

The time leading up to and through an account startup is crucial in building trust with a new customer. A smooth transition can set the foundation for a long-term association; conversely, a disorganized, problematic beginning can lead to problems throughout the contract's term.

"A good [startup] is expected and a bad one is never forgotten," says Tim Murch, CBSE, president of Mitch Murch's Maintenance Management (MMMM) in St. Louis.

"It's a huge transition to mass the manpower, the equipment and everything else you need to go

BY JENNIFER C. JONES

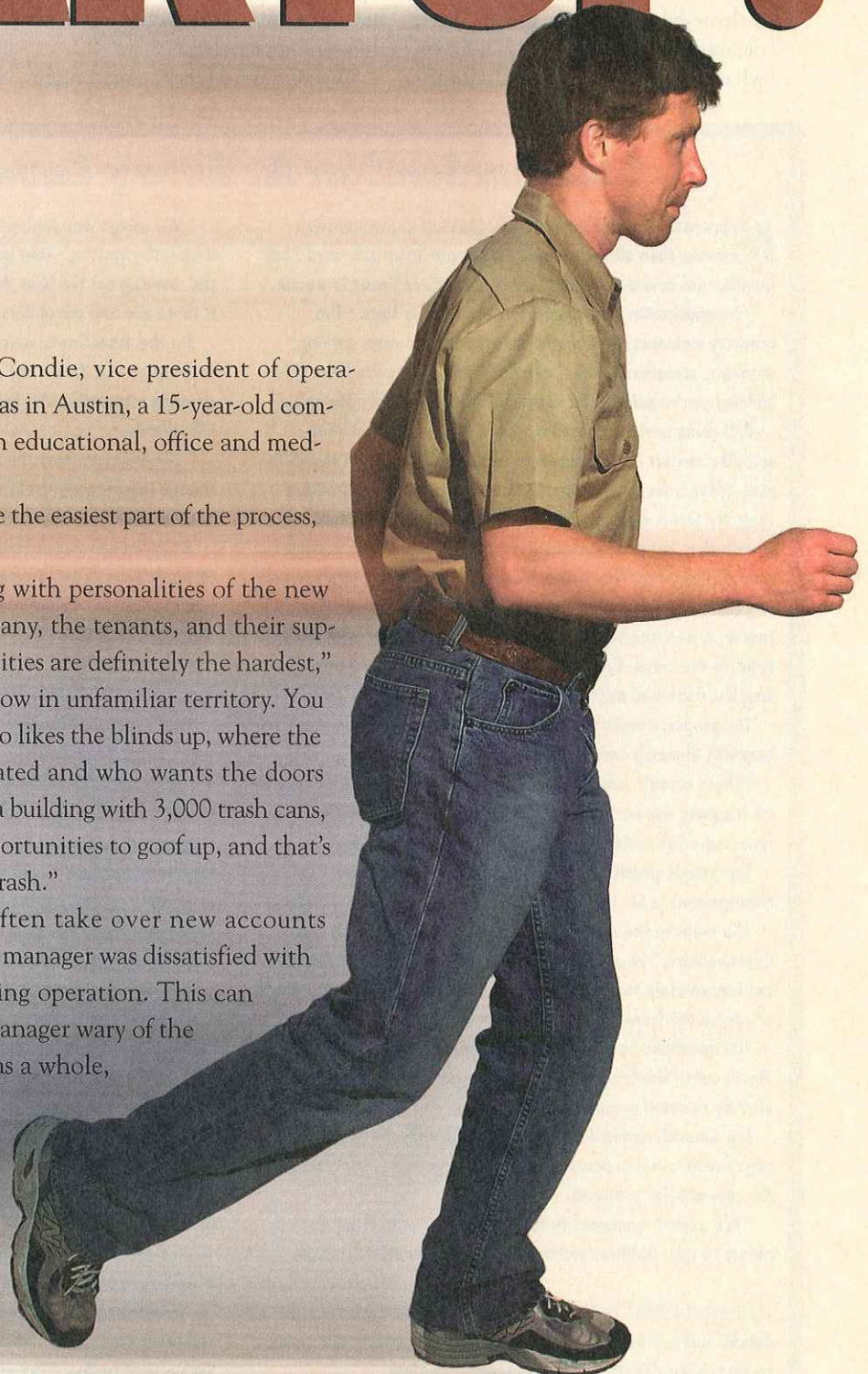
# STARTUP!

in," adds Paul W. Condie, vice president of operations for PJS of Texas in Austin, a 15-year-old company specializing in educational, office and medical facilities.

But that may be the easiest part of the process, Condie warns.

"You're dealing with personalities of the new management company, the tenants, and their suppliers, and personalities are definitely the hardest," he states. "You're now in unfamiliar territory. You have to find out who likes the blinds up, where the Dumpsters are located and who wants the doors locked. If you're in a building with 3,000 trash cans, there are 3,000 opportunities to goof up, and that's just emptying the trash."

Contractors often take over new accounts because the facility manager was dissatisfied with the previous cleaning operation. This can make the facility manager wary of the janitorial industry as a whole, and grouchy about



the process.

"Whenever facility managers take a bid it's either because they have to or they really need to make a change," says Murch. "If we can make that change as seamless as possible it raises their comfort level."

Whether the first day on the job is a three-ring circus or a well-oiled cleaning operation depends a lot on what's happened weeks and months

between signing on the new customer and Day One.

## Beginning the transition

Every contractor has his or her own timeline for preparing to take over a new account. Thirty days' lead time is considered an industry standard, but different circumstances call for different approaches.

"We've started jobs the next night

because somebody bailed," Murch recalls. "There have been situations where another contractor was terminated but they just packed up their stuff that night. It's challenging, but it's also rewarding. We just kick it in to high gear and everybody rises to the occasion."

Under normal circumstances, however, the sales and operations teams have met and discussed the building in

## Communication At Every Level Is Key

**M**ore start-up problems occur because of communication issues than all the cleaning issues put together, says Paul Condie, vice president of operations for PJS of Texas in Austin.

"Communication involves a lot of people," he says. "The property manager, the tenants, the security company, parking company, sometimes even the receptionist. Talk to the folks whose building you're going to be cleaning. Get their e-mail addresses."

PJS gives new customers a special start-up packet that contains contact information and explains company practices that may differ from their competitors. One example: PJS janitors typically throw away anything found in or on top of trash receptacles, but not everyone works that way. Workers once rescued important floor plans from the trash two nights in a row.

Condie tells of another contractor who was too late for a rescue. A new tenant was moving in to occupy an entire floor. Prior to the move, the tenant arranged to have all of the office supplies delivered and distributed in each employee's trash can.

The property manager had always insisted all trash cans be emptied. Cleaning crews complied.

"There wasn't even a paper clip left behind," Condie chuckles. No laughing matter if you are the unlucky contractor. The right communication could have prevented the problem altogether.

Tim Murch, president of Mitch Murch's Maintenance Management in St. Louis, has a strategy to prevent problems.

"To prepare the client for a transition we share a grid, or questionnaire," he says. "We let them know they need to fill it out immediately to partner for a smooth change. The more work we do on the front end the smoother the startup."

The questions include security issues, hot spots, and what Murch calls "heads-up issues." Customers are also requested to provide relevant procedural information.

Eric Conrad, national director of facilities for CB Richard Ellis, says communication protocols for his company are spelled out in the requests for proposal.

"We expect managers to tour the facility once a month and report to [the facilities management department]," he says.

### Assign a point person

Condie makes sure a representative is on-site during the startup to ensure the communication pathways are clear.

"We assign one person to be the [facility manager] contact during the start up. That person is there at the office first thing in the morning for the first three to five days," he says. That way, if there are any complaints, PJS is there to take the heat.

On the other hand, some property managers prefer to have a go-between on their staff to handle communication. For instance, cleaning contractors are instructed not to talk to the CB Richard Ellis clients.

"We tell them how the communication goes. If there's any change in janitorial, the [facility manager] lets the client know," Conrad says.

A special call center handles approximately 900 calls a day for all kinds of contracted services. The call center helps his company track contractor performance.

### Keep employees in the loop

Besides communicating with your customer, it's important to make certain your employees have a clear understanding of what's going to happen.

"Communicating with your employee is 70 percent of the battle," says John Ten Elshof, president of West Michigan Janitorial in Comstock Park, Mich. West Michigan cleaning workers are trained with a combination of video tape instruction and hands-on supervision. After approximately two weeks Ten Elshof feels they're ready to go. Even then it's a matter of constant follow-up to make sure there are no misunderstandings.

Condie advises contractors to keep a dialogue going with their suppliers as well.

"If you're not buying direct you have to allow a lot of lead time to get your equipment and supplies," he notes.

At PJS the policy is to have all of the supplies delivered to PJS or held at the vendor's warehouse two weeks before the jobs starts. Condie even goes so far as to specify the order products are loaded into delivery trucks to make unloading them on-site more efficient.

Overall, good communication is what transforms a cleaning vendor to a valuable partner, says Conrad.

"Problems will arise but you'll have a relationship where you can work through it," he says. "Our goal is to manage the issues versus just saying, 'You messed up. You're gone.'" ■

detail — before the job is even bid. There is also a complete staffing break out by personnel, wages and hours, as well as checklists of equipment, uniform and communication-device needs.

"It's all in the planning," he says. "We've developed an extremely comprehensive, formalized check-off list. It covers everything."

The key to success, says Murch, is when the sales and operations departments work together at all stages.

"There are many companies where sales and operations don't get along," he says. "Sales creates work for operations. We have an understanding where the teams support one another and they both benefit compensation-wise from growth opportunities."

Once the teams have determined what it will take to do the job, a bid is submitted.

"We want to be as competitive as we possibly can but we're usually in the middle cost wise," Murch says. "That's good. It's a responsible quote. We show customers how we came up with it."

By the time MMM is awarded the job, most of the legwork has already

been done. Operations personnel already know what to order and how much. The human-resources department is hiring or transferring employees and setting up training classes.

Likewise, at PJS, hiring starts no later than 30 days out.

"We have a very aggressive training and hiring program and we like to

up, we're OK with that."

Condie says his company traditionally assigns these employees to existing accounts during the interim. It's a practice he says makes transitions smoother, customers happier, and employee turnover lower. Years of experience have taught him how to workload a facility and how many employees he'll need.

John Ten Elshof, president of West



# IN A BUILDING WITH 3,000 TRASH CANS, THERE ARE **3,000** **OPPORTUNITIES** **TO GOOF UP**

have a mix of new hires and veterans," Condie notes. "Most people are not going to spend the money to hire a person more than a few days out because they don't feel the income is coming in. If we have a person on the payroll two or three weeks before start

Michigan Janitorial in Comstock Park, Mich., also likes to have additional employees on hand. He has at least four or five trainees working in other facilities that can be transitioned to new business as the need arises.

Ten Elshof thinks finding the right employees is the toughest part of new start-ups.

"If they're not successful, we're not successful," he notes.

Hiring, training and doing your homework on the building are important. But contractors have to balance getting new clients and keeping existing ones.

"Getting your ducks lined up is important," says Condie, "but a customer that's unhappy, that's urgent. The urgent pushes out the important."

## Making the switch

If we start on a Monday night, we go in on a weekend and bring the employees in," Murch says. "We give them an orientation, get all the equipment in place, and walk them through their stations. When Monday comes they know where everything is and they are familiar with the building."

## Remember The Hidden Cost Of Starting Up

**W**hile your objective in getting new business is to make money, don't underestimate how much it will cost you.

"It's a tremendous investment in management time and labor," says Tim Murch, president of Mitch Murch's Maintenance Management in St. Louis.

Someone has to cover a manager's previous area of responsibility while that individual supervises the new start-up.

"We usually have two supervisors in training at all times to be ready for new job opportunities and growth. It's a commitment to be prepared," Murch says.

There may be hotel and travel costs. And of course, there's equipment.

"You could have \$50,000 in capital equipment that you have to purchase. You have to have good banking relationships and good payment terms with your client," Murch adds.

"It's very expensive," agrees Paul Condie, vice president of operations for PJS of Texas in Austin. "It not only costs more to clean, you're investing in labor, equipment, visiting customers, and workloading buildings."

Also, remember to account for the delay between the startup and payday; it may take several weeks before contractors get paid.

"You must be able to cover two to four payrolls and all the supplies and equipment to start the job before you get a penny," says Murch. "That's where some smaller companies are challenged." ■

Condie also prefers starting up on a weekend. "It gives us a chance to get in and spruce up," he says. "Often, the company that is leaving just quits cleaning. We like people to come in Monday morning and by the time they get from the parking lot to the elevator they know we are a new company."

That suits customer Eric Conrad just fine. Conrad is national director of facilities for CB Richard Ellis, an international, commercial real-estate firm based in Los Angeles.

"The most important thing is go a little overboard. Spend a little extra right out of the gate so that the first impression will be a lasting one," he says. "That's especially important when taking over from another company."

Conrad says no news often is good news. If he doesn't receive any complaints he knows the contractor is doing his job.

"Sometimes you can charge for getting a place cleaned up, sometimes you can't," Murch states. "Regardless, you want to make that initial impression."

### Up and running

**A**ll of the advance preparation helps new accounts come on line faster.

"After three days it's running pretty smooth," Condie says. "By five to seven days it should be fine."

During those first days PJS supervisors walk every room, every night. Managers team up with supervisors to make certain cleaning tasks are done correctly.

Supervisors are key to a successful job, Murch agrees. He even brings in managers and supervisors from other accounts and territories to help get a new account off the ground. During the first week or so, there is one manager for every two to three employees.

"We check every trash can, soap dispenser, and paper dispenser for the first week or so to make sure everything is being done," Murch says. "We secure the building and have a little meeting before we leave so that we know whoever was responsible for each floor or zone has done everything they should have and secured the area. Our objective is to get compliments instead of complaints."

After roughly two weeks, management hours drop and employee productivity typically picks up as workers become familiar with their jobs and their surroundings.

Still, now isn't the time to slack off. Although the building's crew can work more autonomously, there still needs to be follow-up. Managers should constantly be looking for improvement.

"Take each job you've done," advises Murch. "Before, during and after sit down with your staff and say, 'How can we make it better?' Keep pushing the envelope and raising the bar." ■

Jennifer C. Jones is an industry writer in Layton, Utah.

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