

Big Box Issues

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Landing a large pest control account for service can certainly be thrilling—with its promise of lots of customers, minimal driving and your staff having all their duties for the day in one gigantic place. Sounds great and, in many cases, it is. The accounts are high profile with additional opportunities for things such as bird jobs, mosquito control and termite work, not to mention the potential for all the portions of the building you did not contract to work in.

But bigger is not always easier and often can be so frustrating that you'll wonder why you ever bothered in the first place. As I've assessed and evaluated sites—from shopping malls to airports, office buildings, outdoor centers, hotels, food service, and commercial office parks—it's clear these clients can be difficult. How many times have you bid on sites such as these, only to find they have had a new pest control firm every year or two since they opened? There are reasons for this. The most common, quite frankly, is our own failure to think big enough. Even in the bidding process, we don't see the whole picture. Clearly, our industry wants to solve pest concerns no matter where they occur, but sometimes thinking only of our individual client inside a large structure causes us to miss the overall issues.

All large structures have similar concerns, regardless of the industry being conducted inside them. So, what we discuss here is equally applicable to office buildings, airports, commercial parks, etc. For the purpose of this presentation, we will look at shopping complexes: malls and strip centers. The world's largest malls are outside of the United States. China has the top two: South China Mall and Jin Yuan. South China Mall has 9.6 million square feet of space with 7.1 million square feet of that number leasable area. Jin Yuan has 7.3 million square feet of space with 6 million leasable. In North America, our largest mall (ranked third in the world) is the West Edmonton Mall in Alberta Canada with 5.3 million square feet and 3.8 million leasable. In the United States, we have two that compete for our largest-- Mall of American in Bloomington, Minnesota, and Sawgrass Mills in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Both of those properties claim the same 4.2 million square foot total space with an equal 2.5 million leaseable space and rank in 14th place. Another US Mall, King of Prussia Mall (ranked fairly high on some lists) is actually a group of three older malls connected together and operated by one property group. The number of potential clients is huge at any one of these sites. Mall of America has 520 stores, Sawgrass Mills has 320, and King of Prussia has 327. There are approximately 46,990 notable shopping malls in the United States today. This number, if it reflected strip centers, would be many times higher. These properties are in constant flux with tenant change and remodeling.

From a pest control standpoint, since the number of these sites is so high, virtually every pest control firm has an opportunity to service them. The problem is our services, in almost all cases, are not based on the whole structure but on the spaces leased to our

clients. This has been our traditional way of doing business--sign an agreement for the space used by our client. That is all well and good for free standing buildings, but as only a room or series of rooms in a larger structure, there are many problems that occur. Problems we can't always see or lay our hands on because they're out of our reach. Our client only knows they hired a pest control firm to deal with their concerns and to be proactive for future issues. The fact that the only thing separating them from a neighbor might be wall board and insulation is not their problem--it's ours. If a neighboring space or the main structure itself has a pest issue, our client is vulnerable and we have our work cut out for us.

The best time to address these issues is before the agreement is signed. For large accounts with multiple locations, this opportunity might not exist since you have already signed the client under a master agreement and are simply taking on a new location. The first thing to do in any area where a PMP is to operate is to identify the pests that are normally encountered. Even before a structure is erected, there is a population of insects and animals in the area. Any of these can become a pest problem for the occupants of the structure once it is built. They range from house flies to rodents, roaches to ants, raccoons to white tail deer. In other words, anything can become a pest under certain conditions. As a PMP, you are responsible for recognizing the pest threats in the areas where you work. Your clients need to know what they face and how you are prepared to be proactive.

Understanding building construction is very important. Just visiting a commercial construction site provides a wealth of information. Often the opportunity for such a visit can be arranged through clients you already have as termite pretreatment accounts. You need to see the process from the ground up. There are many components (utility chases, roofing practices, material choices, etc) going into a building that pests can exploit to their advantage. Unless we take the time to see such things, we don't understand the access points pests use to invade our clients. We also have to understand how utilities such as water, power, computer and surveillance are handled for the structure. These necessities have many penetrations and voids that are creating easy passage for pests. The nature of construction takes time and as a structure is erected, it allows pest entry into areas that can provide ideal living conditions for small creatures. Mice, for example, enter through doors left open for construction and find wondrous supplies of food and shelter without the threat of predators from the outside world. Populations can explode even before a building opens to the public.

More often we find ourselves dealing with a structure already in operation. A mall might have been open for a number of years, gone through all sorts of changes both in tenants and structure and certain questions need to be answered. Before we seriously engage in the work to be done, regardless if it is a new building or an already existing structure, we must ask:

1. How old is this building?
2. What condition is it in?
3. Is this the entire original structure?
4. Have portions been added or removed? How long ago?
5. How many times has it been remodeled?

6. What types of concerns are created with the exterior landscaping? This would involve trees, bushes, plant beds, or simple building to soil contact zones.
7. Who is the management company for the site?
8. Who are the management company's vendors for things such as a sprinkler systems for the building? This is important because some vendors have access into every ceiling void in the entire structure. They see things we need to know about and will share such knowledge, if asked. I've done it and it works.
9. What pest control firm services the common areas?
10. What other pest control businesses service accounts of their own at this site? You see the trucks communicate with these fellow professionals.
11. Who controls the surrounding property, parking lots, parking lot islands, and out parcels that may be occupied by restaurants and other businesses? There might be landscape firms working in these areas using pesticides to deal with issues such as ants.
12. How is trash handled? Are the containers in use by multiple tenants or are they for individual tenants only? How many trash hauling firms are there and who are they?
13. Where are the smoking areas? Most structures do not allow inside smoking anymore, therefore there will be areas where smokers congregate outside. In the process, doors are propped open, things are consumed, and cleanup is hurried or nonexistent. Accumulations of consumables, butts and trash on the ground or in unemptied waste baskets are highly attractive to pests of all sizes, not excluding homeless humans.
14. What other clients does my firm have in this main building or the surrounding ones?
15. What pest control issues do I know already exist in this area?
16. What pest control issues does the local health department already recognize here at this site? This is public information you need to check this out.
17. What is the tolerance of the local health department when it comes to sanctions or fines that might be levied for pest concerns?
18. For the individual client you are to serve, how is their space separated from the others?
19. Does your client already have identified pest issues?
20. Where does your client fall in relation to other spaces within the structure? Frequently, mall management firms do not fully understand how their site is actually being used. Case in point: empty restaurant sites being used as storage for other unrelated small businesses within the mall. Pests developing here are unrestricted and populations can explode. A map of the entire structure is a must in order to understand any concerns that could arise. A detailed map of your client's space is also required. As with any PMP involved site, this client map must show vulnerable areas and the deployment of pest interventions.
21. With regard to your clients within the larger structure, what are their responsibilities for the space they occupy? This would be for things such as simple structural repairs, utility issues, even termites entering their space.
22. How is the relationship your client has with the landlord or mall management firm? There needs to be open communication or issues will not be addressed.

This is a question I have asked myself and the answers can be very enlightening. Sometimes, you find the client has a terrible relationship with the management firm and that will impact your efforts severely. Other times, you'll find very interested parties and possibly an opportunity for additional work that you can get paid for.

There are certainly lots of other questions, but these will get you started in the right direction. Taking on accounts under the conditions we have discussed is no simple task. Without proper management and the right level of involvement, you are destined to fail. You risk not only your brand name, but the brand name of your client as well.

Considerations to have before undertaking such work is an understanding of how lease or rental agreements work and, in particular, the one your client has on their property. Since the properties are limited in number, and desirable locations are at a premium, property management firms hold the upper hand in the arrangement. Your client could be totally responsible for all types of maintenance in their space, as well as any problems that arise with the various utilities. Therefore, as you speak about maintenance and repair, be aware your client may actually have to foot the entire bill. Also, be aware if the lease agreement requires all the tenants to have a regular pest control program in place. This information is very valuable when a site wide pest issue presents itself. Additionally, the property management group or landlord should have a clause in the lease that allows other spaces to be monitored or accessed for pest issues, should the need arise to protect the entire property. There should be a provision to have tenant meetings sponsored by the management firm to get the tenants on the same page for complete resolution of pest concerns.

Green programs impact pest control issues for a large site. Requirements for areas of grass or plant beds end up providing cover for a variety of pests. These areas need to be managed and maintained to be unattractive to such invasions. Trees are a concern as well, because they attract and harbor many species of pest birds too close to the building. In some cases, large structures have planted areas on the roof that bring ground nesting pests to places where they are not normally found and are extremely difficult to deal with. The Green movement is here to stay and we, as professionals, must be able to work effectively with the programs our clients have in place.

Pricing an account in a larger building should reflect the added effort that is required to provide pest control programs that have satisfactory results our clients want. Since all we really sell is our time, you must allot enough to get the job done correctly and in a way that is result oriented. The time required to assess and evaluate the client can be considered part of the pricing exercise. The assessment services themselves could be of interest to the property management team. Being paid to evaluate the property is a valuable service that benefits all of the tenants. It highlights your professionalism and expertise to a very large group of potential clients.

Large structures represent a fantastic opportunity for any pest control firm. However, unless the work is approached taking into account the entire structure, failure and a loss of reputation can result. With each passing year, more and more of these large structures are being built. They require a new way of thinking and approach with regards to pest control, and have the potential to add huge amounts of profitable work to this industry's bottom line

Remember the 12 Key Factors©

Hopefully you will be assessing and evaluating large properties very soon and adding to your company's profit dollars. The 12 key factors of pest control can help guide your efforts.

The Resources for any pest are:

1. Access - a way into someplace they are not supposed to be.
2. Food – something to eat when they get there.
3. Water – something to drink when they get there
4. Harborage – a comfortable place to live on your clients premises.

Where to look for pests and their resources:

1. Underneath
2. Around
3. Behind
4. On top of – this is the one we miss most of the time and we pay the price as professionals every time it happens. Get on the roof of these large structures to see what is going on.

The true solutions to pest problems:

1. Cleaning
2. Sanitation
3. Maintenance
4. Product rotation

Please note the solutions do not mention spray, fog, bomb, bait, trap, or fumigate. This is because those are tools and methods we use to drop populations and reduce the number of pests at a site. The real answer is to be proactive through the true solution of making and keeping the site very unattractive to pests. It is harder and initially, it is costly. However, if we work in partnership with our client base, it can be done and save dollars in the long run. The bottom line is always to be part of the team that protects your client's brand with your own brand. Be proactive in your methods and keep communication lines open with your client.

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