“What are you treating for?” That’s a common question that most of us get asked by a customer’s neighbor. “Ants. Spiders. Beetles” are common enough replies. The neighbor usually goes on to tell you about a time he had ants and what he did to get rid of them and everyone carries on with their business. What if the answer is Bed Bugs, Roaches, or Rats? The conversation will usually go in a much different direction. We all know that those type of pests are associated with, in truth or not, filth, unsanitary living conditions, and stigmatized socio-economic or racial demographics. When someone finds out that they are living next to a home with roaches they may jump to certain conclusions about their neighbor, how he does or doesn’t clean his house or even what type of people he associates with. It may reinforce negative feelings that he already had about “those people”.

This is just one example of the sticky business of customer confidentiality. We work in some of the most private settings of people’s businesses and homes. We see food harvested, slaughtered, processed, sold, and served. We work where people live, eat, sleep, and bathe. They tell us details of their travels, habits, families, and lives. And, quite frequently, they show us their bites. Much of what we see are things that no one wants to be common knowledge. I’ll briefly describe other instances where customer confidentiality is an important consideration.

One relocation company that we receive WDI inspection orders from has very direct wording prohibiting the inspector from disclosing any information or results to the homeowner. As the purchaser of the inspection, they own the information. Similarly, in a routine real estate WDI inspection, the purpose is to inform the buyer about the condition of the home, and ideally, they receive the report before the seller has knowledge of it.

Around the shop, and amongst others in the business, we all have a good time telling our “worst ever” stories. These are the ones about the man with Bed Bugs in his chest hair, roaches in the bed, basements carpeted in dog poop, and all the aromas associated with hoarding. Sharing these stories in private is good fun, but if we put a name or an address to the stories, this information can cause embarrassment, anger, rumoring, or even cost a business it’s reputation.

Ranking as the most contentious realm of customer confidentiality issues, one that I touched on last quarter, is the department of tenant and landlord relations. It is all too common to be caught in the middle of a dispute between two parties that want to pass the blame and the bill onto one another. The landlord wants to find evidence that the tenant brought the bedbugs in so that he can avoid paying for the treatment, keep the damage deposit, and/or evict. The tenant would like to blame the landlord, insist that he pay for the treatment and any additional compensation they have a right to, or break a lease without penalty. Both parties want incriminating evidence on the other and they expect you to provide your expert opinion.

In the above examples, and in many others, a little information in the wrong hands can cause big trouble. In our business we have a ‘one customer’ practice. One person ordered the work, that person is also paying the bill, and that one person is the only one entitled to findings, recommendations, or proposals. If they ask you to share the information, you do, but otherwise it’s between you and the customer. And in case the nosey neighbor asks, you’re treating for pests.
3 Factors To Consider Before Selling Your Company By Stuart & Donna Aust

Currently, merger and acquisition activity in the pest control industry continues to surge. How long this will last is unknown. However, this trend should continue to remain active for some time thanks to the favorable business climate, low interest rates, access to loans and capital, strategic planning and growth of pest control companies, and entry of private equity firms in the industry.

Deloitte conducted a recent survey of more than 1,000 corporate executives and private equity investors, and the consensus was that merger and acquisition activity would continue to accelerate. Approximately 70 percent of executives interviewed in the U.S. and 76 percent of executives from domestic-based private equity firms believe that deal flow will continue to increase.

Other factors to consider – Although your company may be ready to sell, the question is, are you? Here are some of the “softer” factors to consider when deciding it’s time to sell:

• While all the internal and external selling factors may or may not line up, you may not be ready. Some owners make the decision to keep their business in the family. Others decide to sell. It’s a very personal decision. Your desire might be to grow your business for now and sell in the future. If that’s the case, it’s important to keep in mind that the due diligence (pre-sale) and integration process (post-sale) can take six months to a year and a half. Plan accordingly.

• Others see that selling can translate into higher income. They realize that investing the payment from the sale of their business can exceed their annual salary as owner. The return of your investment with a wealth advisor or in real estate can be quite lucrative. Selling your company does not mean it is time to retire. In fact, the sale can be the start of a new beginning that allows you the freedom to pursue other ventures, such as starting a new business, traveling, serving your community or church, or continuing to work for the new buyer. For instance, selling our company allowed us to start The Aust Group.

• When choosing a buyer, keep in mind that you will likely be staying on at least six months to a year. In addition to getting your target price, you may want to ensure the cultures and leadership styles of the two companies are closely compatible. This can ease the transition between staff members, as any merger can bring a certain level of stress.

When you receive one of those offers to buy your company, don’t be so quick to dismiss the prospect of selling. It’s easy to disregard the idea of selling when your revenue and profitability are surging and all is well. Defying logic, this could actually be the right time to give serious consideration toward selling your company, as it can yield the highest return.

STUART AUST is president and DONNA AUST is chief editor and consultant of The Aust Group, a mergers and acquisitions consulting firm based in Upper Saddle River, N.J. Stuart is also a PMP columnist and former owner of Bug Doctor and its affiliates. He can be reached at stuart@theaustgroup.com.
How To Curtail Cockroach Callbacks

By Diane Sofranec

Cockroaches are not going to go away by themselves. Effective treatment depends on many factors; here’s how to gain control.

Sometimes, cockroaches come back after treatment thought to be successful. Even when pest management professionals (PMPs) use every tool at their disposal, control may be elusive. Here are 10 tips to help reduce customer callbacks.

1. Eliminating callbacks, or at least reducing them, should be the goal of every PMP. Establishing protocol for different species of cockroaches in various sanitation conditions is significant in achieving this goal. — Philip Smith, President, Compass Pest Management, Cornelia, Ga.

2. Educate and inform your customers of all aspects of the treatment procedures and protocols, as well as the treatment schedule, including your expectations and expectation timeline. Callbacks usually are related to the ongoing support needed (sanitation, housekeeping, building maintenance) to maintain control after the problem has been resolved. Customers have a tendency to let down their guard. — Bill Melville, Owner, PRIZM IPM Solutions, West Linn, Ore.

3. Educate customers to let them know what they can do to reduce conducive conditions and what results they can expect over time. — Philip Smith, President, Compass Pest Management, Cornelia, Ga.

4. If the source of the cockroach infestation can be identified and linked to a specific supplier, an employee who is bringing them in, a family member who travels, a particular store where they shop, help them understand the changes in these areas that need to be made. — Bill Melville, Owner, PRIZM IPM Solutions, West Linn, Ore.

5. Do the best job possible on the first treatment. Treat every home like it is your own. — Crystal Boyd, Commercial Sales Manager, Pest Management of Texas, Sachse, Texas

6. Assuming a thorough service was initiated, the callback rate can and will be reduced with client cooperation and education as to why and how the issue first emerged. Inform customers that specific services require some time to take full effect. Make certain technicians are experienced, knowledgeable, and understand what to do and do it well. Otherwise, issues will emerge. — Dennis Mastrolia, CEO, Dennis the Mennis Pest Experts, Lynn, Mass.

7. Schedule follow-up visits and share expected results with your clients. Let them know when you will be back and what to expect between now and then. Stay proactive in your plan, and discuss any questions your client may have when talking about next steps. — Kent Smith, ACE, Owner, A+ Quality Pest Control, Oskaloosa, Iowa

8. Since making changes in the materials we use, and equipping all technicians with HEPA-filter vacuums, callbacks have almost become non-existent. Because cockroaches have an incredible ability to adapt to materials, we must field test new methods of treatment long before they adapt to our current treatment methods. — Josh Fleenor, President, Pest Pros Pest Solutions, Sacramento, Calif.

9. Take your time to do a good job. Many technicians hurry through the job and don’t eliminate all of the cockroaches. Slow down. In the pest control business, time is money so we are always in a hurry. But you have to know when to slow down and when to speed up. — Randy Konold, Owner, Sodak Pest Control, Watertown, S.D.

10. Give customers a pest sightings report. Ask them to record any cockroach sightings, including the time, location, number of cockroaches and name of person or employee who saw them. — Kent Smith, ACE, Owner, A+ Quality Pest Control, Oskaloosa, Iowa

— From Pest Management Professional

Top 3 Worst Rat Cities In The U.S.

Rats have been enjoying a close relationship with humans for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Humans derive no benefits from having rats around, but rats get all sorts of perks. Most notably: food, shelter and water. Often this has little effect, but in some cases, rats go too far, and their impact on human populations becomes unbearable.

These cities are among the most rat-plagued places in the United States.

Rats have the run of Chicago, although the city receives some help at decreasing the rodent population from an unexpected source. That assistance comes from coyotes, which are allowed to roam the streets of Chicago as part of a study to see how coyotes behave in an urban environment.

Baltimore’s rat problem is bad enough that at one point, rats tunneled so intensely beneath a particular area of pavement that when garbage collectors drove over it, their truck sunk up to its axles. Rats in the vicinity took full advantage of the mishap and swarmed the truck, gorging on the garbage inside.

Incidents of unexpected rat appearances are frequently broadcast out of the Big Apple (New York City). Take the KFC/Taco Bell ratscapade of 2007. At a KFC/Taco Bell fast-food outlet located in Greenwich Village, a pack of rats drew big crowds and camera crews after they were discovered nonchalantly scurrying around the main eating area of the restaurant before it opened for the day.
Boric Acid Kills Bed Bugs, But Only When They Eat It  By Andrew Porterfield

After years of apparent dormancy, the bed bug (Cimex lectularius), has made a comeback in Europe and the United States. While the insects do not transmit disease, they are a nuisance, infesting bedding and other furniture and leaving clear symptoms of biting. As scientists try to determine a reason for their resurgence, pest management professionals and members of the public have searched through a number of eradication methods, including chemical pesticides and other treatments, with varying (and often negligible) success.

One common treatment has been to use boric acid on bed bugs, as a dust, spray, bait, paste, gel, or liquid. Dust may be the most common boric acid treatment, but it’s efficacy is not known. Some pest control advisors and agricultural extension agencies have even recommended not using boric acid at all. To help determine the efficacy of boric acid on C. lectularius, a team from North Carolina State University led by entomology professor Coby Schal, Ph.D., examined two ways to deliver boric acid: contact with dust or by ingestion. They also compared results to boric acid at concentrations up to 1 percent, though the number of fully engorged bugs dropped to 80 percent at 5 percent concentrations.

In a study published in September in the Journal of Economic Entomology, Schal and his team report that boric acid can kill a significant number of bed bugs—but only if the chemical is ingested. Bed bugs that eat boric acid at concentrations greater than 2 percent die quickly, and concentrations as low as 0.5 percent caused 100 percent die-offs, although at a slower pace. However, external contact with high concentrations of boric acid dust did not have a significant effect on bed bugs. By comparison, boric acid effectively killed concentrations of German cockroaches, regardless of the route of contact.

The researchers conducted four experiments on the bed bugs and roaches.

- The first experiment involved feeding boric acid to 10 adult male bed bugs, at concentrations between zero and 5 percent. The bed bugs were fed for seven days.
- The second experiment involved exposing bed bugs to boric acid dust. Here, 118 starved and 120 fully fed bugs were placed in dishes containing boric acid dust, and mortality was measured for 14 days. In the second experiment, the researchers also looked at whether boric acid particle size had any effect on bed bug mortality, homogenizing some boric acid powders.
- The third experiment involved injecting German cockroaches to boric acid dust. One group of roaches had glued mouthparts (to prevent ingestion), while the second group was free to feed.
- The fourth experiment involved injecting boric acid directly into the bed bug’s body (specifically, the hemocoeel) to determine toxicity of the chemical to bed bugs.

Bed bugs had no aversion to feeding on boric acid at concentrations up to 2 percent, though the number of fully engorged bugs dropped to 80 percent at 5 percent concentrations.

Simple exposure only to the dust showed a 33 percent mortality rate among bed bugs after 14 days of observation. Increasing concentrations tenfold only increased unfed male mortality by 10 percent, and there was no difference between fed and unfed bugs. Nor did reducing the size of boric acid particles have any effect on bed bug mortality. In fact, more than 85 percent of fed bugs survived external boric acid exposure.

Injecting bed bugs did cause high mortality rates (up to 95 percent at higher concentrations), indicating a toxicity of boric acid to bed bugs that the insect’s cuticle is effective at staying off.

Ingestion, by comparison, was easily induced in bed bugs and highly effective at killing the bugs. A single blood meal with 0.5 percent boric acid killed 80 percent of all bugs in seven days. Concentrations above 1 percent killed all bed bugs within four days.

By also testing B. germanica, which can be killed by boric acid ingestion or exposure, the researchers found some clues as to how boric acid may work on insects. “It appears that this otherwise insecticide-susceptible strain of bed bugs possesses mechanisms that prevent boric acid from compromising or penetrating the cuticular barrier,” the researchers write.

Exactly how boric acid does its job remains a mystery, which presents challenges in designing baits to attract and ultimately kill bed bugs. But boric acid is a preferable chemical candidate for use in bed bug baits, since it is soluble and stable in water, is not as toxic to mammals as other chemicals, is relatively low cost, and doesn’t appear to trigger resistance by insects.

As for the use of boric acid in dust applications, though, the study shows such efforts are likely to be minimally effective against bed bugs. The researchers note that boric acid dust is widely available to consumers and pest management professionals and is effective against other urban pests, hence its common use. But, for managing bed bugs, methods to induce ingestion of boric acid will need to be devised.

– From Entomology Today. Andrew Porterfield is a writer, editor, and communications consultant for academic institutions, companies, and nonprofits in the life sciences. He writes frequently about agriculture issues for the Genetic Literacy Project. He is based in Camarillo, California. Follow him on Twitter at @AMPorgerfield or visit his Facebook page.
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Don’t Lose Those Leads

It can take years to build a business. It can take just 30 seconds to lose a customer.

Phone calls are still the most common method of customer queries and service orders, but social media messaging and online chat portals are gaining ground quickly. That means there are increasing entry points for your customers and potential clients. It also means pest management professionals (PMPs) have to keep up with the increased volume of incoming requests for service.

Here are some pointers for balancing a heavy volume of orders, and the growing importance of social media in making sure your company can bolster its “speed to lead.”

- **Every phone call matters.** Answer every one, but be transparent with your customers. Tell them you are busy and try to set reasonable expectations, but go ahead and set a timely appointment. Check in with the customer as the appointment approaches. Calls at 10 a.m., 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. can help you get a feel for whether they have booked services with another company. If they have, you can fill that slot ahead of time.
- **Stay on top of social media messaging.** You may have noticed more queries coming in via social media. Facebook is pumping up its messaging medium. As social media platforms make it easier for customers to interact with companies, more customers are going to use that as an option. People want to get their questions answered quickly, 24 hours a day. Huge companies like Apple, Amazon and Facebook have raised the bar for response times. Most people aren’t going to cut you slack because you are a small or medium-sized business. People expect a 30-second response time. Facebook now recognizes companies that have a solid response time with badges that are available for the public to see.

- **Contract your communications needs.** Even if you have an in-house person handling incoming service inquiries, you can’t reasonably expect a marketing manager to respond efficiently 24 hours a day. You have a very short window to respond to potential customers. Contracting that work out to companies that offer live home service chats, for instance, is significantly cheaper and can pay for itself with increased leads.
- **Respond quickly.** If a lead comes in via a website chat feature, it is crucial to respond quickly. There is no trail of digital clues to trace for future reference with an anonymous website query. This makes responding to website leads even more critical than responding to social media messages. With social media, at least, you can put together a pretty good profile of a potential customer and track down him or her if needed. A Harvard study concluded that if you respond to a customer service inquiry within five minutes, there is a 400 percent greater likelihood they will book an appointment. If you fail to book within this timeframe, the person will often move on to your competitor.
- **Triage as needed.** If your call volume is overwhelming, your company needs a triage system of sorts. People expect a 30-second response time. Facebook now recognizes companies that have a solid response time with badges that are available for the public to see.

- **Be empathetic.** Home service chat professionals are thoroughly trained in how to interact and respond to customers. If you still maintain leads in-house, one of the most important points to keep in mind is empathy. Because you’re dealing with pests everyday, it’s easy to become desensitized to customers’ needs. Remember, they are calling you because they have a problem. Potential customers will give more data to a reassuring voice than an apathetic one. That means they have made an investment with you and will be more prone to hire you now, or in the future. The more information you can collect, the better chance of converting the lead.

The many ways in which customers interact with your company can seem daunting, but the more points of entry, the greater chance you have of growing your business.

DID YOU KNOW?

Of the heavy weights in the insect world, a rhinoceros beetle wins the title. Megasoma actaeon is found in Guyana, South America and adults weigh in at an astonishing 3.5 ounces (100 grams)!

Your average grasshopper weighs 0.01 ounces (300 mg), so it would take more than 300 grasshoppers to weigh as much as one Megasoma!
Employers across the country are struggling with the issue of employee drug testing as more states allow the use of recreational or medical marijuana. Although pre-employment as well as random drug tests have always tested for marijuana, more stories of employers who are doing away with tests altogether are showing up in the press for various industries.

Is this the right approach for pest management companies? Can they still establish drug-free workplaces? How can employers ensure that policies do not expose them to allegations of discrimination?

Elimination of employee drug tests is not likely to be widespread in the pest management industry, says J. Scott Hudson, Esq., Stovash, Case & Tingley, P.A. “I do not see this as a trend in the pest management industry, namely because a large percentage of industry employees drive company vehicles, enter customers’ homes or buildings, apply chemicals that in some circumstances could pose safety concerns, and are otherwise engaged in safety sensitive duties,” he says. “As a result, many employers place a priority on the safe performance of job duties.”

Kylie Luff, senior vice president and managing partner of Seay Management, agrees and says that members of her firm have not heard from their clients that elimination of drug tests is a consideration. “As of right now, based on our research and conversations with local attorneys, courts are still allowing employers to enforce their drug-free workplace policies,” she says.

Although establishing a drug-free workplace policy is still possible, it is important to make sure that company policies are enforced fairly and consistently with all employees—whether the use is medical or recreational marijuana.

“To the extent employment action is based on the violation of company policies and not the medical condition given rise to the use of medical marijuana, most states allow employers to discipline or terminate employees who violate established drug-free workplace programs, and this includes those who test positive for marijuana usage,” says Hudson. “It is important to remember that marijuana is still illegal under federal law and, if an employer is covered by DOT or other federal guidelines, the employer may be required to prohibit marijuana usage.”

As the number of states that have de-criminalized or legalized marijuana has grown, the perception of its use has changed as well among potential employees.

The legal use of medical marijuana in states that have approved it does give employers an option to test for substances but still employ people using it medically. For example, an employer can test for the same list of prohibited substances for all job candidates but consider accommodation of marijuana usage for non-safety sensitive employees who provide medical certification.

**Legal in 31 states.** As of mid-2018, 31 states, including the District of Columbia, have enacted comprehensive legislation covering marijuana usage. The majority of these states limit usage to those with medical conditions, while about one-third of these states allow for recreational use under some circumstances.

Although some laws legalizing marijuana specifically state that they are not intended to require employers to allow marijuana use in the workplace or to affect company policies related to marijuana use, most laws are silent or ambiguous. However, in 2016 Maine was the first state to expressly prohibit an employer from hiring a person solely due to off-duty use of marijuana. The Maine statute, however, does allow employers to prohibit use during work hours or to terminate an employee under the influence at work.

Because laws differ from state to state, it is important to work closely with human resources staff or an employment lawyer to be sure that the company complies with state laws. As more states legalize marijuana and as more court decisions are published, it is critical to stay up-to-date and rely on experts.

Companies that span several states—with differing laws regarding marijuana—face more complex challenges. “I recommend that employers have drug-free workplace programs customized for each state,” says Hudson. “As an example, some states have nondiscrimination provisions related to medical marijuana usage, while other states give wide latitude to employers.”

What will be the biggest employee drug-testing challenge for employers in the future?

“The biggest challenge will be balancing the need for a safe workforce against the state disability laws,” says Hudson. “While the Americans with Disabilities Act is a federal law and does not cover medical marijuana as a protected category, many states have enacted similar employment-oriented disability laws that might require employers to provide reasonable accommodation to employees or applicants who use medical marijuana. However, even in the most progressive states, employers are usually not required to permit use on company premises or allow an employee to work under the influence.”

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