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FLIPPING THE SWITCH

Refine your methods for knowing when to activate your team



By RICK KIER, CSP

Knowing when it's "go-time" can be one of the most difficult aspects of the snow and ice management business. Deploy too early and you waste labor, materials and your team's energy. Go too late and you risk not hitting the deadlines you promised your customers and increasing your liability risk if people are injured at the sites.

Our job is to take all of the information we can gather about the weather – both what has already happened as well as what might take place – and compare it with the specifications of our work. Then we can make the best decision about when to start and which services to provide.

As a teenager starting out in the snow removal business, I had it easy. My mother was a schoolteacher and a master ceramics artist; she stayed up most of the night working on her ceramic masterpieces or grading English assignments. When it snowed, she would keep an eye out the window and simply wake me up at the appropriate time. If there was just a little snow that might be 4 a.m., and if there was a lot of

snow that might be 1 a.m. In Syracuse, NY, where I grew up, we normally got around 120" of snow each season, so we got to use our system often.

Over the years, as my one-man show grew into Pro Scapes, Inc., with up to 150 team members, the complexity of knowing when it was go-time grew along with the business. Now, with more than 40 years of experience in the snow business, I'm sharing some of the methods we used to activate our team to start providing the snow and ice management services that are the core of our industry.

For most of us, the decision is easy during the day when everyone is awake, and the weather conditions are obvious. The real chore is knowing what is happening at night, when most people are asleep and almost no one is out driving. I learned the hard way that some methods are better than others, and as your business grows your methods need to evolve.

Trust the local forecast

It was easy to trust the local weather forecast. We only planned to set an alarm clock and look outside if the forecast

called for snow. The problem was that many times we received lake effect snow that was not in the forecast. Just a little shift in the wind direction and we got 6" of snow where the forecast had called for none. This only had to happen one time, and we quickly realized that trusting the local forecast was not the best option.

Wake up every night

The next phase in our snow awareness program was to set an alarm for 2 a.m. from November 1 to May 1 to wake up and check for snow. Just like trusting the local forecast, waking up every night had its downside. Occasionally, it would start snowing after I had looked out the window; or it wasn't snowing at my house but it was on jobsites a few miles away.

Wake up every hour

To avoid missing a late snowfall, I started setting an alarm for every hour on the hour from 2 to 6 a.m. I was lucky that I was able to fall right back to sleep after looking out the window should it provide me with a snowless



RAPID DEPLOYMENT: Have a plan that allows seamless launch of operations.

view. This hourly checking method still did not solve the problem of it snowing at jobsites away from the view of my bedroom window.

Keep in mind that back then we did not have the internet, where we could simply pull up the radar and webcams to see what was happening all over the service area. To resolve this problem, I started calling team members who lived in different parts of town to get their pinpoint weather observations.

Team wakes up every hour

As we grew the company and had more managers in play, we were able to spread the load of checking the weather. With five managers checking at their designated hour, the rest of the team could get a good night's sleep except for their assigned weather check. If we were not sure about what was happening outside of our personal sight, we could still call other team members to get a good read on other parts of town.



SCOUTING PATROLS: Not ready to make a technology jump? Team members can scout sites and service more quickly.

Scouting patrols

Over time, the services we offered became more complex. We had customers who needed our services all night long instead of just in time for opening at 7 a.m. We had roads and airports that required much more specialized care. It was time to have someone out scouting any time winter conditions were in play.

Our managers started to take turns driving around to take stock of the conditions all over the service area. If needed, they could then call in the right people to provide pinpoint services for specific locations in a

timely manner. The only downside to this method is that these managers also had daytime obligations within our company; by morning, they would be tired and worn out.

Over time it became obvious that this task was taking a toll on managers and may have been a key factor in why some of them left the company. There had to be a better way.

Night captains

We designated two of our best crew leaders for the new positions of "night captains." They were trustworthy and had all the skills needed to do any of the hands-on services that any customer might need during the night. They knew how to run a salter, drive a plow, operate a loader, deice a sidewalk, etc.

Every night, 7 days a week, from November 1 to April 1, a night captain was on duty from 5 p.m. to 5 a.m. If it wasn't snowing, the night

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captain would do a wide variety of tasks that our company needed to get done anyway, such as restocking jobsites with sidewalk deicer, filling heavy equipment with diesel fuel, returning repaired equipment to jobsites, fixing plow marker stakes that had been knocked over, checking equipment at remote sites, and so much more. If we happened to go days or weeks without snow, they would work on getting summer equipment power-washed and ready for spring, wash windows in the office or any other tasks the company needed performed.

No time wasted. The important thing was that we had useful work for the night captain. This allowed him to be awake and alert for winter weather or icy conditions all night long. If it looked like something might be happening weather wise, the night captain would hop in a plow/salt truck and drive around scouting. When the first few flakes started to fall, our night captain was right on top of it.

He had a company tablet with the appropriate radar websites and jobsite cameras at his disposal; so regardless of the forecast, he was always aware of conditions throughout our service area as well as what was headed our way.



REPORTING FOR DUTY: Having night captains on duty gives your snow team a quicker launch to operations and provides a path toward advancement for select employees.

Quick starts. Based on the time of night, he might perform limited snow work on his own, or if it was getting close to our normal start time for a full event, he would call the manager on duty to initiate a full plowing or salting service.

We also had a special phone the night captain would carry while on duty, and we directed all the overnight commercial customer phone calls to that phone. During the day, that snow service phone number rang in our office; but at night, it went directly to the night captain phone. This allowed customers to speak to a knowledgeable individual who could promptly respond to their needs.

Taking shifts. The two night captains split the week, so all overnight shifts were covered. In exchange for the extra

responsibility they handled, these crew leaders were guaranteed 40 hours a week all winter long, even if it did not snow. It was a great first step on the road toward becoming a manager. A good snow company is committed to the career path of its team members. So, this program provided that next step for crew leaders looking to advance.

Successful approach. The night captain program was a complete success. It allowed the company managers to sleep all night unless there was a full snow event in progress. It allowed our company to respond much quicker to nighttime requests from our commercial customers. And, most importantly, it made sure that we were aware of and on top of any winter weather that came our way.

When I look back at all the ideas we put into practice since I started plowing snow in 1978, the night captain program stands out as one of the best. Many thanks to my wife Karen for coming up with the idea.

Depending on the size and location of your operation, some of these methods may work better than others. Some market areas get very predictable snowfalls; others, like the lake effect areas, are prone to sudden changes based on the direction of the wind and the will of Mother Nature. As always, it is up to you to pick the ideas that will work best for you and your enterprise. **SB**

Rick Kier, CSP, CLP, was president and owner of Pro Scapes Inc. for 41 years before selling the business. He is a founding board member of SIMA and is a managing partner of Forge Ahead Consulting & Software LLC. Contact him at rick@rickkier.com.

TECHNOLOGY AND SERVICES AID SNOW WATCH EFFORTS

Relying solely on a look out the window isn't enough when you can put technology to work for you (regardless of your budget). Some resources you can take advantage of include:

- Community webcams
- Customer-owned site webcams
- Contractor-owned site webcams
- Local weather service websites (e.g., TV stations) for forecasts and radar
- Professional weather services

As your company grows, contracting with a professional weather service adds a useful tool to your service delivery. Depending on the service you choose, you can receive storm alert updates via email, text, mobile app, etc., in advance and up to the storm with an emphasis on storm timing, accumulation, intensity, likelihood and temperatures. These services should also provide 24/7 communication and consultation for decision-making, access to professional meteorologists' expertise, up-to-the-minute briefings and more.