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POOL CARE KRAKEN

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE
FOR TAMING
THE COMMERCIAL
POOL SERVICE BEAST

Picture it: The camera pans across the vast expanse of a resort swimming pool. Bikini-clad goddesses sunbathe in lawn chairs, while ripped Adonises hit perfect 10's off the diving board. There you are, skimming debris from the corner of the pool that is otherwise pristine. You think, 'I've got it easy with this commercial pool care gig – it's the best part of my day.'

And then you wake from your daydream.

"Maintaining commercial pools is not what you see on TV, with bathing beauties lying around the pool watching your every move," says Don Cesarone, Jr., vice president of commercial and senior project manager for Van Kirk and Sons, Inc. in Deerfield Beach, Florida. "It is hard work and by no means an easy job."

Providing commercial pool care services isn't as simple as caring for a bigger pool for bigger cash flow, says Katie Crysdale, principal at Lakeview Aquatic Consultants in Alberta, Canada. "It's a completely different beast that is so misunderstood," she adds.

If expanding into commercial pool service is something you're considering for your company, be prepared for all that entails to succeed in that segment.

CODE UP

Before you do anything else, Crysdale says, learn state and local codes for commercial pool care. "What's going on in Texas is going to be different from Oregon or Pennsylvania," she says. Pool pros may find after reviewing these stricter regulations that it's not a feasible task for their company to keep up with, she adds, which is why she recommends it as step one.

For example, more than half of U.S. states require someone on staff to be a certified pool/spa operator. Florida state commercial pool code reads: "An individual who services a public pool by maintaining the cleanliness, water quality and chemical balance of public pools shall be certified... To ensure that the pool technicians are knowledgeable, said technician shall attend a training course of national recognition that is approved by the department of at least 16 hours in length and shall pass a test acceptable to the department."

Unlike residential pools, commercial pools have strict water-quality regulation and regular, random health department checks. States like South Carolina require commercial pools to be

serviced daily, while others may only require twice-weekly maintenance. Pool professionals will also likely be required to fill out water maintenance logbooks that health inspectors will check frequently, like in California, where the public pool regulation states: "The pool operator shall maintain a written daily record of all test results, equipment readings, calibrations and corrective action taken at the public pool site."

Wes Burdine, owner of Aquatic Energy Consulting, in Kingsport, Tennessee, recommends building a connection with the local health department to establish a trust-centered working relationship. "Know them by name," he says. "Offer to teach pool schools to their charges. Not only will you help share your knowledge, you will gain clients and build respect."

PICK YOUR TARGET

The next step is deciding which commercial client to start with — Crysdale recommends one commercial client in one division — because HOAs, hotels, municipal, YMCAs all have different rules and structures.

"You're going to make mistakes and you're probably going to underprice it," she says, adding that it's better to do that with one client during the learning process than many clients, which could sully a pool company's reputation in the market.

Public swimming pools through local municipalities may seem like a good place to start, but it can be hard to get a foot in the door. "People definitely think municipalities are cash cows because it's steady revenue," Crysdale says. "And eventually, it will be. But you're going to have to work up to those clients because they're going to have more specific requirements, and you're going to have to get into the municipal tender process to compete. You're not going to win bids right away unless you have a relationship and someone invites you to bid."

Burdine says he believes institutional pools, like YMCAs or schools, take more time but can also be more lucrative than

“[When expanding to commercial service,] join Facebook groups for pool people. There is a wealth of knowledge shared by people that have varying ideas. One of my favorites is Talking Pools. Ask questions, share your knowledge.”

Wes Burdine, owner, Aquatic Energy Consulting

HOAs and hotels. He says to be prepared to interview potential clients as well as or better than they interview you, to deal with the right point of contact and document your communication.

“With a residential client, sometimes the wife says, ‘Yeah, go ahead,’ and the husband comes home and says, ‘What do you mean?’” Burdine explains. “Multiply that times 10 with a homeowners’ association or a school board. If you can get a single point of contact who can give you the yes or no, to me, that’s critically important because, if you don’t, nothing ever gets done.”

Crysdale concurs that, while HOAs may seem appealing, they can be difficult to communicate with. Let them know you’re not dealing with the entire board, she adds, but only the designated representative, such as the person who signed the contract. Too many cooks in the kitchen can make it difficult to do the job well.

SCOPE OF SERVICE

Before starting in the commercial pool segment, Crysdale recommends determining what services you’ll offer.

“Hotels never sleep, so are you willing to come out on a Friday or Sunday night to make sure the pool’s running?” she says. You’ll need someone on staff who is willing to go on these calls if you choose to offer it. Next, define the service area; pools that are an hour away will be harder to service effectively at the last minute unless a technician lives in the area.

Decide whether your company or the facility will provide chemicals, and whether you will offer maintenance and repair in addition to water care service. “It seems like a lot of service guys want to do it all, but it’s not all always profitable,” Crysdale says.

Determining the commercial services you’ll provide will also help to define what equipment you may need. Providing chemicals means you need to store and transport them. A large service radius may mean more service vehicles on the road, more employees and more equipment for cleaning the pools.

Whatever you decide, make it official. “Scope of service has to be clearly delineated and you need terminology: things like ‘everything except’ or ‘does not include,’” Crysdale says. “Write up a contract with a lawyer, because the first time there’s a dispute, the contract will pay for itself.”

BE ABOVE BOARD

Servicing commercial pools also increases professional expectations. “Always dress, speak and appear professional,” Burdine says. “People form an opinion at first site. You might be the smartest, most knowledgeable pool person, but if you dress and talk [inappropriately], people will think of you that way, no matter what you know.”

Higher expectations don’t stop at first impressions. Commercial pool service companies are expected to be appropriately licensed entities with the state/province and city business department, Crysdale says. Municipalities will also likely check to see that a commercial service company has appropriate worker’s compensation coverage, and that there are no outstanding claims. “They also want to see, health and safety wise, that you don’t have any fines or any record of safety violations with the city, province or state,” Crysdale adds.

Cesarone says that, while states have mandatory training for commercial pool operators, those who seek continued education will be most successful. His company offers paid training for technicians as incentive to stay updated on industry trends.

Where it gets messy, Crysdale says, is that the business itself doesn’t hold the CPO, an individual on staff does and, as long as one person does, the company can usually bid on a commercial job. “If I’m the CPO of record for the property, anybody I delegate to is not responsible — it’s my head that’s on the line,” she says. “So I have to be confident that I want that facility job or contract. And that the guys under me are actually listening because, if they’re not listening, it’s my liability.” Another option, she adds, is providing CPO training to all the service technicians in the company.

Tom Sanger, owner of Tom Sanger Pool and Spa in West Bradenton, Florida, says getting a commercial pool contractor license is a good idea, too. “What we run into is people who just have a CPO and they try and take care of the pool,” he says. “Next thing you know, they try to dip their hands into doing some of the repair. That’s scary when the guys who don’t have their repair license are doing that sort of thing.”

READY FOR ANYTHING

Commercial pool service companies also need substantially higher insurance coverage. Municipalities may require that companies bidding on a service contract have millions of dollars in coverage. “A municipality can blow through \$10 million to \$15 million easy if you really mess up,” Crysdale says. “You won’t even be invited to the table if you can’t prove that you have [appropriate coverage].”

“It’s best to carry as much [coverage] as you can afford,” Burdine says, “because they’re going to sue everybody if something happens.”

As an exclusive insurance broker for the Independent Pool & Spa Service Association since 1981, Ray Arouesty, J.D., president of Arrow Insurance Service, is a leading expert on liability insurance provisions and needs for pool professionals. He recommends evaluating risk when looking for an insurance policy by examining what is done each day when servicing commercial pools, because, unfortunately, no standard insurance policy has the provisions that a pool service company needs.

“The closest thing to a standard policy for the swimming pool service industry is totally inadequate,” he says. “A standard policy has so many exclusions for the common claim that the service technician faces that it doesn’t give him a whole lot of coverage.”

Among the areas Arouesty says a standard policy falls short are on coverage for chemical damage, chemical exposure, mold damage caused by overfilling the pool — one of the most common errors he sees each year that results in a claim — repairs or remodeling. The definition of repairs or remodeling is often so vague, he says, that it’s difficult to determine what is and is not covered. “Any policy has to address those hazards that are very, very common in the industry,” he warns.

DROP OF A HAT

Daniel Brodersen, commercial service manager for Millennium Pool Service in Maryland, says being available outside normal business hours is critical in commercial pool service. “You need to have a plan for quick service response,” he says. “It’s easy to lose a customer if you aren’t fast or responsive enough. To most commercial clients, everything is time sensitive.”

If something is out of whack, Crysdale says, they’re going to expect you to come immediately. She recommends pricing your services accordingly — even higher than you initially think — because you’ll short

yourself somewhere in the beginning and it’s often on time.

“You really need to know what you’re getting into,” Crysdale says. “Let’s say I did my check on a pool in Myrtle Beach this morning and it was good. And then the health inspector shows up three hours later and it’s out of whack. The general manager calls me and says, ‘Hey, this is in your service contract and the health inspector is here, you better get over here.’ I’ve then lost my afternoon where [that pool] is not on my route.”

Taylor White, president of Langley & Taylor LLC, a subsidiary of American Pool Enterprises in Nashville, says he added strong technicians to improve response times. He hires people who either have some experience or seem trainable due to their backgrounds in plumbing, electrical, masonry or chemistry. “Twenty-four years later,” he says, “we continue to deliver the best possible service to our clients.”

Overall, Crysdale hopes pool professionals will recognize that commercial is not just an extension of residential pool service. “Unfortunately, people don’t understand how much work goes into it,” she says. “The service expectations are higher. If someone in a family can’t use their [residential] pool for one or two days, oh well. But if you have a for-profit facility and they can’t use the pool for a day, they could be looking at \$5,000 in lost revenue. And that’s just a different beast.” ■

Burdine advises having the following information before taking on any commercial pool service job:

- How often do you want/need me to come?
- How many people are using the pool?
- Has someone else been taking care of it? What did they do?
- Have you cared for the pool within your organization?
- How many people have worked on it?
- How much time do they spend doing it?
- What have you spent on chemicals over the last three years?

Steps for expanding to commercial pool service:

1. Check state and local codes
2. Pick the type of client you want to serve
3. Decide what services you’ll offer
4. Have appropriate certification and licensing
5. Obtain adequate insurance coverage
6. Budget time needed

As a commercial pool service provider, you are responsible for helping to make sure the pool meets ADA compliance standards for public pools (ada.gov/pools_2010.htm) and entrapment prevention requirements according to the Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act (poolsafely.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/pssa.pdf).