AC

HOW AC COMPANIES CAN FILL THE SHOULDER SEASON

Your slowest months are your best time to call past customers.

Twice a year the weather turns mild and the phones go quiet, while techs and trucks stay on payroll. Most owners cut hours, run discounts or buy ads. Each one has a cost: you lose good techs, train customers to wait for a sale, or pay top dollar when ads convert worst.

CALL THE CUSTOMERS YOU HAVE

Your list already holds homes with equipment you installed or serviced. Mild months are when your techs have time to do a visit right.

IT TAKES VOLUME AND AN OFFER

A strong offer made to a few hundred people won't fill a board. A big list with a paid offer gets polite no's. Put real volume behind a no-charge safety check or maintenance inspection.

START HERE

- Pull last year's board fill by month.
- Rank systems 7 years and older, lapsed plans and unsold replacement quotes.
- Start calling four to six weeks before your soft weeks.
- Cluster bookings by zip and size them to techs actually on the board.

WHAT THE SLOW WEEKS REALLY COST

Payroll, truck payments, insurance and rent don't get smaller when the weather turns mild. A tech with an empty afternoon costs almost the same as a tech with a full one.

That's why shoulder-season revenue carries so much profit. Once fixed costs are covered, each added job falls largely to the bottom line, after labor and parts.

The usual fixes each have a cost. Cutting hours is how you lose the techs you worked so hard to find. Running a discount teaches customers to wait for one. Buying more ads means paying for clicks while demand is at its lowest.

BUILD THE LIST

Start with people who already know you, and rank them so the best records get called first:

1. Plan members who are due for a visit.
2. Customers with unsold replacement estimates from the past year.
3. Systems seven years and older, oldest first.
4. Customers with a repair history on the same system.
5. Lapsed plan members.
6. Anyone you haven't seen in 18 months.

Before anyone dials, clean the list. Fix phone numbers, remove people who've moved, and scrub for do-not-call status. See cleaning up your customer list and the calling rules.

DO THE MATH ON VOLUME

Work backward from the empty slots. Suppose you have 40 open slots over the next three weeks. If about a third of the people you reach book a visit, you need around 120 live conversations. If about one in five dials turns into a conversation, that's 600 dials. Replace these example rates with your own, and you'll know whether your office can make that many calls on top of its regular work. Often it can't, and that's the point to bring in help.

CHOOSE ONE OFFER AND EXPLAIN IT WELL

A tune-up is familiar and easy to say yes to. A no-charge safety check gets more appointments, but it needs a technician who can show real findings and a clear plan for what happens next. Either can work. What doesn't work is changing the offer every week. Pick one, write the words, and give it enough volume to prove itself.

PREPARE YOUR TECHS

A shoulder-season visit is a real inspection. It isn't a drive-by. Give your techs a checklist and ask for photos on every system. Agree on what triggers a replacement conversation, and how an advisor gets brought in. If you pay commission or spiffs, make sure the plan rewards an honest inspection and not just a sale.

SCHEDULE WITH ZIP CODES IN MIND

Book tight clusters. When two jobs are five minutes apart, a tech can do more and drive less. Ask the people calling to offer the day you're already in that neighborhood. Size each day to the technicians you actually have, and leave a little room for no-heat or no-cool emergencies.

KEEP SCORE

Track these for each pass through the list:

- Dials, conversations and booked visits
- Show rate
- Repairs and replacements sold from those visits
- Revenue per technician per day, compared with last year's soft weeks

START EARLIER THAN FEELS NATURAL

The time to work the list is four to six weeks before the slowdown. By the time the board looks empty, you're already late. Put the dates on next year's calendar now, and treat them like a season of their own.

Sources: White Paper 08.

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BEST PRACTICES: EMPTY SLOTS AND THE SHOULDER SEASON

MAKE IT A HABIT

What good looks like

> Your slow months planned at least four to six weeks ahead.

> A target for how full each day should be, by trade and area.

> Fill work ready to book: tune-ups, inspections and lapsed members.

The habits

1. Look at last year's board by week, and mark the soft weeks before they arrive.
2. Start calling past customers four to six weeks before the slowdown.
3. Book by area and time window, so trucks aren't crossing town.
4. Keep a short list of easy yes visits: tune-ups, safety checks and filter or water heater service.
5. Hold back a slot or two each day for emergencies in peak season.
6. Review fill every morning and push the next three days first.

Signs it's time to get help

- Techs go home early or sit in the shop in slow weeks.
- You cut prices to fill the board.
- Nobody watches the next three days of open slots.

How one shop did it: Welsch Heating & Cooling (St. Louis, Missouri). Books maintenance agreement visits into the spring and fall windows, leaving room for two or three emergency calls a day. The slow in-between seasons are planned work instead of empty slots. ACHR News, July 2003

Where we fit: Service ProCall fills slow weeks from your own customer list with a no-charge visit, and ProCall Field shows the open slots by area and trade.

More on empty slots and the shoulder season