GROW AND PROFIT

THE SHOULDER SEASON ROLLER COASTER, AND HOW TO GET OFF IT

Twice a year the phones go quiet and the payroll does not. Here is why, and what ends it.

WHAT THE ROLLER COASTER LOOKS LIKE

Every AC company knows the shape of the year. A hot July fills the board, techs run overtime and the office can't keep up. Then the weather turns mild, the phones go quiet and the same crew sits in the shop. The pattern repeats in spring. Plumbing and electrical shops feel their own version, with freeze weeks and storm weeks followed by long quiet stretches.

An ACHR News column described the cycle well: owners cut marketing in a slow patch to save cash, then overspend to catch up when demand returns, and the cycle starts again.

WHY IT COSTS MORE THAN IT LOOKS

Revenue swings, but most costs don't. Technician wages, trucks, insurance, rent and software all keep running. In a busy month, those fixed costs are spread across a full board. In a slow month, each empty slot still carries its share.

That's why the shoulder months decide your profit. An illustrative example: a shop with $70,000 a month in fixed costs makes good money in July. In October, it runs at 55% of capacity. Every job it adds in October carries only parts and some labor, so the added margin falls almost straight to profit. The same job in July would have meant overtime and a customer waiting three days.

The swings also hurt in ways that don't show on the profit and loss:

- Good techs leave when hours get cut.
- Office staff are overwhelmed in July and idle in October.
- Cash runs short just when you need to stock up for the next season.
- Discounts teach customers to wait for a sale.

THE USUAL FIXES, AND THEIR COSTS

Cut hours. It saves payroll and costs you your best people.

Run a discount. It fills some slots and trains customers to wait.

Buy more ads. You pay for clicks while demand is at its lowest, competing with everyone else doing the same thing.

Hope for weather. Weather is real, but you can't plan payroll around it. See weather and your trade.

EQUITY MINING: WORK THE LIST YOU ALREADY OWN

Equity mining means systematically calling your own past customers, ranked by need, to book work. Your database is the one source of demand that doesn't depend on the weather or on outbidding anyone. These people already know your name and have already paid you once.

Trade press keeps naming the same lists to work: systems 10 and 15 years old or more, customers with several recent repairs, skipped maintenance, lapsed agreements, and open estimates. One ACHR News columnist reported a contractor booking $135,000 in five days from 250 contacts without ad spending. Treat that as a best case. The principle holds.

The key is that the calling happens before the slowdown, at volume, and by people trained to book. Start four to six weeks before your soft weeks, not after the board is already empty. See filling the shoulder season and cleaning your list.

THE NO-CHARGE VISIT: LOWER THE BARRIER TO YES

A paid offer to a past customer gets polite no's. A no-charge safety check or maintenance inspection removes the risk for the homeowner, so far more people say yes. That's the point. The visit isn't free work for its own sake. It gets a trained technician into a home where the equipment is aging, at a time when your crew has room to do a careful job.

To make it pay:

- Offer it to the right list: older systems, repeat repairs, open estimates.
- Train techs to do a real inspection, with photos and written findings.
- Present honest options, including "you're fine for now."
- Follow up on everyone who doesn't buy. Many will call back when a real need comes up, and they'll call you.
- Track the visits like any marketing spend: cost, shows, sold jobs, revenue.

Never use a no-charge visit as cover for pressure selling. Customers talk, and so do reviews.

PUT IT TOGETHER

1. Map last year's board fill by week. Mark the soft weeks.
2. Pull and clean the lists four to six weeks before each one.
3. Work the list by phone with a no-charge visit offer, at the volume your open slots need.
4. Cluster bookings by ZIP code.
5. Sell maintenance agreements on those visits, so next year's soft weeks come pre-booked.
6. Measure revenue per tech per day against last year's slow weeks.

Done consistently, shoulder season stops being a season. It becomes the time of year when your techs have room to do your most profitable work.

Sources: ACHR News, Stop the Revenue Yo-Yo; ACHR News, shoulder season plan; Contracting Business, reactivating customers; Service ProCall program guidance. Worked examples are illustrative.

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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