

Your wash is temporarily shut down. Now what?

At the time of this publication, twenty six states have issued statewide stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders. While essential businesses remain open, many car washes have not been able to qualify as 'essential', or don't have enough traffic to remain open.

No one wants to be closed, but forced closings can provide you with a unique opportunity to “wow” your customers when you reopen. With the goal of being even better when you do reopen, here are some suggestions for operators in the process of closing or who have already closed.

Strategic Plan:

- The #1 most important thing you can do during this process is to have a plan with timelines and communicate it to everyone.
- You should have a strategic “what if” plan even if you don’t plan to close. You never know if a government agency might make the decision to close for you, with little to no notice.
- Communicate your closing date to the employees as soon as you have it
 - ◇ If any/all employees will be furloughed, try to have information ready for them that explains where to apply for unemployment and what will happen to their healthcare benefits (if applicable).
 - ◇ If you are going to keep any of your employees on the payroll, be ready to discuss with each of them what specifically you expect of them as the site closes, during the shutdown and as you reopen.
 - ◇ Important: It should be made clear to all employees, whether furloughed or not, who (if anyone) is authorized to interact with the press. You need to control mis-communications and bad assumptions as much as possible.
- After your employees have been informed, post on your social media sites and through email/text blasts when you are closing and why. Stick to the facts and try to avoid a long drawn out explanation. Less is more in these situations.
- Concurrently communicate your monthly wash club plan with your members. Strategies used here could include deferred billing until you reopen and a “free” membership equal to the number of days you are closed for existing customers after you reopen. The ultimate goal is to retain all monthly club members. It is much easier to keep a current customer than have them cancel their plan and then try and get them back again in the future.

Pre-Closing Plan:

- Put up flyers at your pay stations and have your service advisors inform customers when you will be closing and why. Everyone from ownership down needs to have the same, consistent “talking points” when they explain this.
- If the pending shut down is not immediate, use your existing labor to start a deep clean throughout the facility. This is a good way to give your “performers” additional hours when you are slow, while also getting much needed cleaning completed.

Closed plan:

The length of time you plan to be closed will dictate how much, or more of this you do.

Operations:

- Draft a closing check list so each planned activity is documented by priority, assigned to someone and marked off when completed
- Put up signage readable from a vehicle, that you are closed and a contact number/email customers can use if they have any questions
- Communicate electronically *at least once a month* with wash club members regarding your plans to reopen, if you know. Include what you are doing with their auto payments while closed and after you reopen
- Communicate to all furloughed employees any new government programs that may help them through this difficult time
- Check in with any of your key personnel that are furloughed to see how they are doing.
 - ◇ Consider having a local restaurant deliver dinner to each of them and their families occasionally
 - ◇ Keep communications going, let them know you care and attempt to maintain good morale
- Use the down time to:
 - ◇ Research government small business support programs, tax relief programs, SBA offerings, loan payment deferments, etc.
 - Make sure you are discussing the best options for your specific business with your accountant and bankers
 - ◇ Renew licenses, insurance, etc.
 - ◇ Review and update your written procedures, onboarding and training programs
- Decide if you are going to run any promotions when you reopen. For example: During your first month reopened, free top wash for first responders and medical

personnel (with proper ID) as a thank you for their hard work and sacrifices while we sheltered in place

- If you don't have a wash club program now is a great time to design one and introduce it when you reopen
- Update any old or outdated marketing
 - ◇ Note: this may not be the best time to increase package prices

Facility:

- Shutoff your auto programmed open sign
- If you have a reader or monument board on the street, change it to communicate you are closed until further notice. It is suggested you don't communicate a firm reopen date because that could change due to government actions
- Thoroughly clean the conveyor and trench. Pressure wash everything including the hard to reach places.
- Do a heavy duty clean on your walls, floors, equipment and parking lot. Allow the waste water to go into the reclaim tanks prior to having them pumped
- Remove all vac claws & hoses from customer accessible areas, clean thoroughly and put away
- Good time to have your vac manifold "snaked"
- Clean or change your vac producer bags
- Clean all light fixtures and replace any defective bulbs
- Paint any areas of the facility that need it. This includes building interior/exterior, vac frames, bollards, parking lot striping, etc.
- Clean up landscaped areas, add new perennials, plant new annuals

Chemicals:

- Remove all pickup lines/foot valves from the chemical containers and seal each container so they are air tight to prevent contamination or evaporation
- Put pickup lines/foot valves in a bucket of fresh water and turn on each function until all chemical residue is flushed through the lines. This includes all dispensing equipment, tanks and lines all the way out into the tunnel. Leave fresh water in the lines and foot valves in a fresh water bucket so they don't dry out.
- Ensure all hydrominder tanks, injectors, chemical pumps, etc have been flushed with fresh water
- Take inventory of your chemicals and ensure your supplier knows what needs delivered prior to you reopening
- Make sure all of your SDS information up to date
- Inventory your PPE and decide if you will need to increase inventory levels of gloves, sanitizers, cleaners, etc.
- Now is great time to add any new chemical applications in the tunnel you have been considering

Reclaim system:

- Switch your reclaim system to fresh water and run multiple washes so all reclaim water is out of all high-pressure pump tanks, supply lines, nozzles, etc. This can be done prior to closing so you ensure all reclaim water has been flushed out of the system.
- Check with your specific reclaim manufacturer on how or if your unit should be shut down for the long-term
- After everything has been cleaned, drained and refilled, have your reclaim tanks pumped out and cleaned. This will avoid an additional distraction when you reopen.
- If you are not going to have your tanks pumped, you might need to leave your reclaim system operating so your tanks circulate. This will reduce how much your reclaim water turns septic, causing additional problems when you do reopen. Check with your reclaim system manufacturer.
- Refill the reclaim tanks with fresh water so you can run all equipment while you are closed

Equipment:

- Empty cash from all pay stations, vending, etc. Good opportunity to complete manufacturer recommended maintenance for these units.
- Shut down all non-essential electronics such as camera arches, pay stations, desk top computers, etc.
- Replace your chain, rollers and sprockets if needed.
- Lubricate your conveyor chain links, sprockets and roller up mechanism to prevent rust from forming while closed. Check with the conveyor manufacturer on what lubricant should be used.
- Drain your air compressor, replace the intake air filter and service the compressor if it is due.
- Shut off compressor but remember it will need to be turned back on when you run your equipment each week
- Consult with your RO manufacturer on what you should do with your system during the shutdown.
 - ◇ RO membranes are expensive and do not like to sit idle for long periods of time
- Operate all high-pressure pumps on fresh water
- Repair any equipment as needed. Bearings, cylinders, welding are typical targets during slow times
- Arch lighting should also be checked, repaired or replaced as needed.

- Replace worn cloth
 - ◇ Be sure to run multiple cars with the chemical being applied prior to reopening. This gives the cloth time to break in and the chemicals a chance to saturate the new cloth.
- Complete all equipment PMs
- Inventory your parts supply and reorder needed quantities
- Twice a week, or more, run multiple “ghost” cars through the entire wash process to avoid the equipment sitting idle for long periods of time.
 - ◇ Remember to turn on your air compressor before starting and shut off when done
 - ◇ Ensure all applications and equipment are operated each time.
- Turn off the hot water heater/boiler, good time to service if needed

Re-opening plan:

- Is everything sparkling clean and in tiptop shape? The world has changed, after all of this, customers, now more than ever, are going to expect their car wash of choice to be very clean and well-lit.
- Do you need to implement a new sanitizing program and let your customers know about it?
- When a firm re-opening date is known, immediately communicate it to your furloughed employees along with their new work schedule.
- Post the re-opening date and any specials on social media in an upbeat format welcoming your customers back
 - ◇ If you are going to offer any promotions, this is a great time to let everyone know
- Prior to your reopening, bring in all employees for retraining
 - ◇ Explain any new marketing and promotions
 - ◇ Train on any new PPE and sanitizing programs/procedures
 - ◇ Discuss customer interaction/social distancing policies
 - ◇ Anticipate customers questions and give your employees standardized answers for them to follow
 - ◇ Employee attitudes and preparedness will dictate your returning customers first impressions
- Re-opening day: Everyone and everything needs to be “ship shape” so you make the best customer impression possible
- Take down your “closed” signage
- Change your reader or monument board to “we are open” with your operating hours so customer confusion is limited

These guidelines are not meant to be all inclusive or even fit every wash type. We just want you to realize that down time is an opportunity to finally get around to tasks we always wish we had more time to do. We can also improve our facility and operations to make a “new” first impression. The COVID-19 pandemic is changing the world. Our customers will have new expectations. It is up to us to take advantage of the shut down time to prepare for new ways of running a car wash.

March 30, 2020

As a critical business, Ver-tech Labs will remain open. We are still operating our production facility and shipping products. The remainder of our staff will be working remotely and are available via email, phone or text. Please feel free to reach out to any of us for discussion.

I am praying for a speedy resolution to the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recovery. Together we will get back into the business of washing cars.

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