

SNOW MERRY-GO-ROUND

Elevate success with year-round planning and execution



By PHILL SEXTON,
CSP, ASM

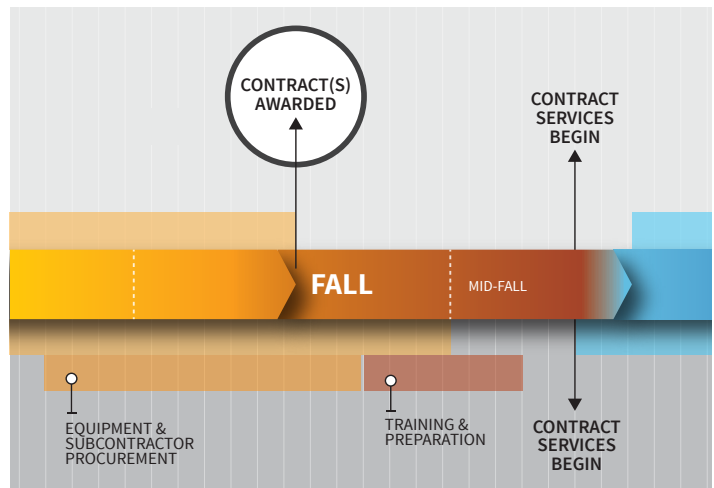
Standardizing success for any winter management business requires a 52-week focus and a commitment to planning and implementing standards of practice. The snow and ice management industry should plan like the retail industry, which prepares for the next holiday shopping season the day after Christmas. In this way, the end of the current snow season should ideally be approached as the beginning of the next snow season. Due to the more recent economic environment and supply chain challenges, it is important to plan even earlier than the original standard.

As you build a framework for your year-round sales and operational calendar, look to SIMA's 52-week procurement timeline for guidance. Furthermore, answering questions posed in this article (as well as others you might have) related to seasonal timing, philosophies and any constraints, will help guide you through the planning process.

Timing and philosophy

Successful snow and ice management operations share a philosophy that snow is a year-round business; therefore, you need to treat it as such. Establishing a forward-thinking philosophy is critical to any successful business or operation – particularly in today's economic climate that includes supply chain and inflation challenges. Being forward thinking includes planning sales and operations at least 6 months ahead of each deadline and establishing growth plans two years (2 winter seasons) ahead. Therefore, it's important to approach your planning in quarterly "chunks" of time: 3, 6, 9, 12, 18 and 24 months ahead.

If you're thinking, "I can barely look to next month, let alone winter 2023," narrow your focus to planning snow-related tasks in each of these quarters to help reduce the tension that is normally felt when gearing up for yet another season. Let's start with where you should be in the timeline as you read this article in October.



SUMMER / FALL: PRESEASON REVIEW

➔ Summer is the best time to identify and/or reacquaint yourself with new sales prospects, subcontractor relationships and material ordering (e.g., bulk and bagged, salt, blends, brines, etc.). If you're still in "renewal season" even now, you're way behind the eight ball. The ideal time to renew clients is during the postseason review process in the spring.

We know most customers aren't accustomed to signing on the dotted line until sometimes as late as when the first flakes of the season are ready to fall. It is our responsibility as snow professionals to educate our customers about why it is in their best interest to renew or award contracts on time – which they will initially consider "early."

New contracts require a standardized start and end date to the process. It is the contractor's responsibility to decide the necessary amount of time to prepare in their geographic market(s).

When evaluating new contract opportunities that provide less than 60 working days of preparation time, consider whether you can realistically meet a client's level of service requirements. This includes educating the client on the amount of time it takes to procure the proper capacity of people, equipment and materials. For example, given the current economic environment and supply chain challenges, the timeline for purchasing or renting equipment could require an additional 3-6 months (optimistically) to purchase a new vehicle.

While all markets and customers are different, the timeline targets Sept. 1 as the cutoff date for finalizing contracts. Educating your clients to mutually commit to this target requires the contractor to consider when property owners are typically accustomed to awarding contracts versus when they should. Important to consider in the contract award equation is answering the question: Why would customers award

contracts sooner than they are accustomed to? What's in it for them? These are important questions to be able to genuinely answer if you are to be successful at changing the customers' habits.

For example, committing to a Sept. 1 award date will put the contractor in a better position to ensure the operations team is trained and the capacity of resources have been acquired, prepped and ready to go.

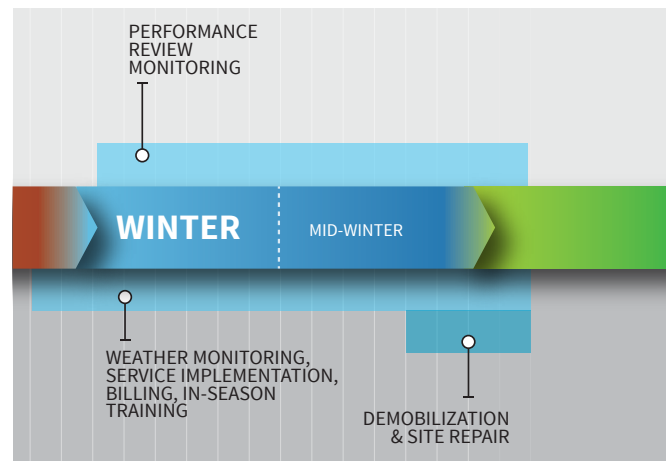
WINTER: PRE-STORM & POST-STORM REVIEWS

➡ Winter is when the work gets done, but it is also prime time for observing, assessing and documenting improvement and optimization opportunities. Don't wait until after the season to identify gaps and opportunities to better serve your clients and make your team's lives easier for future storms and future snow seasons.

Questions to answer during the season include:

When does snow service begin? My opinion has always been that snow service begins upon a forecast for snow or ice. Even if the forecast ends up being a false alarm, your clients received the benefit of your team being on standby and service-ready. Do your clients understand this value?

What does snow service include? My philosophy is only about 25% of the service that snow and ice management



contractors provide is the actual plowing and ice management. The true value proposition that differentiates the “big boys” from the rest of the contractor crowd is everything else that happens before and after the storm. The forecasting, pre-storm planning and communication, training, equipment capacity on hand, communication during a storm, post-storm cleanup, ice and drift watches, post-storm communication, and the preparation should all be considered in your pricing.

Continued from page 13

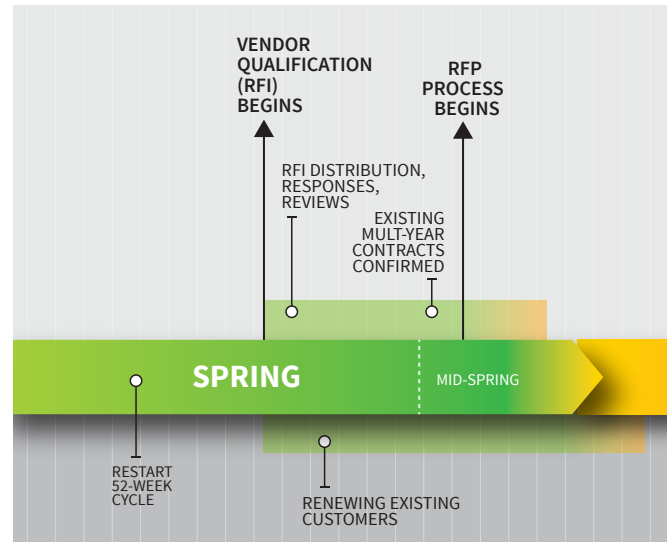
What pain(s) have you experienced ... and never want to repeat? Equipment breakdowns. Being understaffed. Being underequipped (you knew a pickup truck couldn't handle the job). Lack of proactive communication with clients that cause them to be unhappy. You know the issues; therefore, you should pay attention to them, document them and decide how to address them before the next season.

SPRING: POSTSEASON REVIEW

➔ Springtime is sales renewal season. At the tail end of the season, contractors should be scheduling end-of-season walkthroughs and confirming that clients are on next season's routing schedule.

Renewal contract award timing is typically done in as little as a couple of weeks or, best-case scenario, a few months before the upcoming season. Rather than a standard renewal timeline, consider implementing a standardized postseason review process with clients to determine opportunities to improve for next season. During this process is ideally when the renewal should be presented for approval once any further improvements or punch list items have been identified and addressed.

Questions to consider before you renew or sell new work include:



What pain are customers most focused on? Usually, property managers are focused on the current season pains like HVAC breakdowns and other building infrastructure issues. Making it easy to sign up for next season's snow services could be a valuable proposition to ease their future bottlenecks of budgeting and decision making if presented in a way that focuses on what's in it for them.

What pains are you and your business most focused on? Most snow contractors are also landscape contractors, and it is understandable that they are already in motion with

the next season's service demands. Therefore, focusing on the renewal process as part of an end-of-season review is important because it allows you to prioritize and schedule before the next service season fully begins in spring.

When do your customers finalize budgets? Property managers typically start budget forecasts in June/July for the next snow season. It makes sense to put the renewal contract in front of them before then.

When do you finalize budgets? Do you budget? Snow season sales forecasts and the budget process should begin the day after the end of the current snow season. Project how much sales growth you want to add at the end of the current season. Then focus on renewals to better estimate how much in sales you truly need to grow. If you know you are renewing 90% of your work and you want to grow by 20%, then you need to sell a total of 30% of your current sales. This takes time. And the best customers to have are those that aren't looking for last-minute contractors.

Are you hiring? Staffing is likely to continue being the contractor's biggest challenge to overcome. Like sales, we should always be recruiting and interviewing to maintain and add workforce capacity. Ads sometimes work. Paying attention to your industry network is better. I find referrals from our great employees have always been the best sources of finding more great people. Who else knows people? Your

customers. Ask them. I know we are afraid to admit to our customers we need more people. In this new economic age, it's no longer a secret.

Standardize success

Standardizing your sales and operational planning using a 52-week calendarized system and philosophy is sure to help you further optimize your level of preparedness and profitability. Educate your customers and your operational teams on the importance of the timing as it relates to their best interests. Staying disciplined to the timeline(s) you set for yourself and your teams is what will guarantee success. **SB**

Phill Sexton, CSP, ASM, has been developing, practicing, and teaching Sustainable Winter Management (SWiM) standards for over 30 years. Contact him at psexton@witadvisers.com.