

25 Questions to Ask your Car Wash Provider

Wouldn't life for a buyer be so much simpler if the car wash industry standardized and developed a code of ethics for all manufacturers and suppliers? After all the accounting, legal and architectural industries have a set of standards; why shouldn't the car wash industry? Is it too much to ask, when you begin to investigate and interview prospective vendors, to know that they have a set of standards, a code of ethics? Don't they/we profess to be professionals? I'm one, and I do feel that some way to judge fairly is definitely required to level the playing field.

I pose this question and make these statements for many reasons, not the least of which being that I have been in the shoes of both buyer and seller. I have listened to, watched and seen some things in our industry that I find despicable, irresponsible and unfortunately unaccountable. So do you sit by and watch, or do you stand up and be counted? I'm for standing up and suggesting that our industry hold its members accountable. Unfortunately my soapbox antics will receive little attention and I'll be an audience of one, but I will not be dismayed or swayed from my task nor will I accept the old scapegoat of "buyer beware". So if I can't change the vendor community I can offer some tools and thoughts for would-be buyers.

In any endeavor you need a starting point, a place where you can interview and evaluate fairly your potential provider. Now at this point you might ask, why? Why do I need a tool to assist me in my decision? The answer is that you need a device to provide a logical and factual answer to all your inquiries; you want to make decisions based on fact! Remember, it is not about equipment, it is about the business. The business is assisting you to be in a place where you can be profitable and create wealth; car washing is just the vehicle.

As in any interview, you need a starting place. In the sales arena we call this the "address" period, the time we get to know one another, look each other in the eye, explain our needs, and what each can bring to the table.

Before we get to our "25 Questions to Ask your Vendor", you need to come prepared. This would include an interview plan as well as your assessment of the project. Your

goals, financial commitment, type of facility you are envisioning, and the level of involvement which you expect from your vendor. Pre-planning is critical to a successful meeting. Prior to your meeting I suggest you use the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) approach to evaluate your competitors as well as yourself. Use this as part of your overall planning strategy.

Twenty five (25) questions to ask your vendor:

1. Tell me about your business. How many years in business? Who are the principals? What is their experience in the car wash industry? Do they own and operate car washes? If so, how many and what kind? Why did they make the decision to be (or not to be) in this business? What and how do I benefit from their decision?
2. Whom do you represent? Why did you select them? What enables them to offer me a competitive advantage? Who are some of their key accounts? How long have they been in business? Describe your relationship and the support you get that will benefit my business.
3. If I were to select you as my provider, what tools and or assistance would I receive as it relates to design, consultation with engineers/architects, meeting with and representing me in front of government boards, sitting with my lawyer and any other member of a team I put together? Is there a cost for this service? If so, how much? What success have you had in these areas? Would you demonstrate and validate your statements?
4. How do I do business with you? Terms and conditions of sale? Deposits, refunds, payment, guarantees? Will you provide me financial references, vendor and or primary bank relationship?
5. Who is your customer? How do you serve him? What references can you provide me?
6. What is the normal timeline required for equipment manufacture? Delivery? Installation time?
7. Regarding the equipment and installation, what are my responsibilities? Yours? Do you have a list that clearly delineates each of our responsibilities? Will you acknowledge and have this as part of our agreement?
8. Based on my site what will you do as to site review, financial projections and suggestions as to which type of wash and the methodology of wash

(friction/touch-free)? Do you offer various types of systems? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each system, mechanically or financially?

9. Based on what I have shared with you, what do you feel is the best approach to my market? Why do you feel this way? Are there similar locations to mine and, if so, now that they are up and operating have they met the stated projections? Does your customer feel they have met their expectations? If they have (or have not), why?

Assuming we have gotten through the “interview” stage, and are comfortable with the answers, the next stage is to begin creating our car wash. What type, where located, how big, how costly, what kind of return and timing.

10. How, and why, would you lay out my property? What would you project the total cost to be?
11. I have been told that “highest and best use” is the mantra for all real estate investments. Based on what we have discussed, does what I am proposing meet that requirement? Will the income projected support the investment?
12. You have suggested a certain approach to my market. Although I have done a SWOT analysis, how competitive will I be to other car washes? What threats are there that you know about that could affect my business? What opportunities?
13. What is the life expectancy of the equipment you have proposed? What programs do you have that will minimize downtime? Do you provide cost-per-car programs for maintenance and chemical? What is my commitment? Yours?
14. Car washing is a cash business; what systems are you recommending that will enable me to manage and track the variable expenses of my business? What are the costs? What is the benefit?
15. Although we have spoken about service and maintenance, how far from my operation is your service facility? Will you guarantee a certain response time? Will you consider a program guaranteeing a certain uptime? If so, tell me how it works?
16. One of the items needed to assure adequate financing is a good business plan. What assistance will you provide? Is there a cost? Will you meet with my bankers if required?

17. I know you can't legally control competitive locations from being placed in my market; however, what can I rely on from you to keep me informed and competitive?
18. What assistance will you provide for marketing? Is there a cost? Are there any co-op advertising dollars available? How do they work? What are the various advertising and or public relations mediums I should be using?
19. What assistance will you provide for training? Is there a cost?
20. Do you have complete service manuals and install drawings? When may I receive and review them?
21. Do you have contractors that you recommend? Will you assist me in making that contact?
22. Will you walk through all the mechanical requirements of your system with my team?
23. I understand that some of the equipment you will provide comes from a number of various suppliers; will all equipment be guaranteed the same?
24. As you can well imagine this is a very significant investment. What ongoing assistance can I rely on?
25. Why should I buy from you?

I'm sure you can come up with some things that I may have forgotten. The key to this whole process is that:

- I feel I am receiving honest information
- That the vendor I've chosen has both our interests at heart
- The numbers are realistic
- I am comfortable that my projections support the investment
- I am on a program that will create wealth.

Car washing is a relationship business. It is important to set mutual expectations early in the process.