

Just the Facts Man!, Just the Facts!

**By Fred Grauer, Executive Vice President
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I'm one of those guys who grew up with Buck Rogers, Dick Tracy and a host of other comic book heroes. Yes I'm in that senior part of middle age where "old dogs" have to learn new skills. Remember wrist radios, space ships, transporters and a lot of other futuristic inventions? Who would have ever thought that in my life time just about everyone of those goodies have come to be! It is incredible to think that we are living in a time where information is available as fast as you can log on, dial a number, or say "Jiminy Crickets".

As a carwash owner/operator we are just seeing the benefits of all this technology. Now we can obtain credit reports, competitive information, do our banking, download data on our industry, visit car wash chat rooms, and basically investigate and educate at the touch of a finger. No longer are we making decisions purely on gut feel and guess work now it's the facts. As an ex-partner told me facts are your friends! Use them and use them wisely.

Recently my partners and I went to purchase another car wash. We decided to utilize the Small Business Administration (SBA) loan program for our project. No sooner had we typed SBA.gov, than we had all the information you could imagine regarding the requirements of a successful loan application. In addition to the loan information there were helpful hints on business plans, marketing plans, general accounting and the types of entities you might want to consider (C corps, LLC, sole proprietorship) in setting up your company. What we did in minutes, in the old days might have taken weeks.

Thinking about the application of technology, probably the greatest aid to the "accounting challenged" was the advent of the personal computer and some really terrific soft ware programs. It wasn't that long ago that the majority of business owners and managers looked at financial reports as being one of the true mysteries of business. Oh sure we all knew how to make ledger entries, mark down receipts, account for expenses and in general had a handle on our businesses, didn't we? And hopefully when our bookkeeper turned over our records to our "accountant" we found out how much or little we made! Of course he challenge was if we didn't find out in time could we take fast corrective action?

Thank goodness times have changed. Today the technology and information systems available to us are terrific. With my partners, we are known in the trade as multi site operators. Our locations are, on a minimum, 35 miles apart. As a result it is difficult to get to all sites in a day, so the question becomes one of how do you stay tuned. Last week we interviewed a firm that will enable us to oversee sales, security, labor, profit and loss, maintenance, inventory, customer service, and much more via the internet. We can call in or be called and look at critical

decision information on our PDA equipped cell phone or laptop. I mean is this great! We are actively engaged at all times with our business. Bottom line we are armed with the facts that enable us to maximize our operations.

Besides being informed we are now able to respond to any situation quickly. And as they say time is money. Now the cost for these modern day wonders is not small, however cost is once value is forever. Let me site one small example. We are asking the bank to loan us a significant amount of money. The bank asks for all the normal data plus they want to know how we are overseeing our business, their potential new site investment partners. You produce current financials, and I don't mean last month or last quarter, but current as of yesterday, oh and while you are at it you demonstrate via your phone what is going right now. They ask for any operation report and "zip" there it is. Now that clearly demonstrates how in touch you are. And as hard as this is to accept everyone finds computer generated data very believable.

Banks are very nervous when it comes to single purpose buildings (car washes) and cash businesses. Show the bank the control you have on operations and cash management, mix that with your ability to produce quick accurate financials, and go to the head of the class.

Bankers and any other business partners want to know that you are in control and knowledgeable. Think of it this way, who would you loan money to? The guys with up to date information or the group who is dealing off last quarters or worse last year's financials? To me it is a no brainier, information is power!

Ok, so now you have instant information and a good handle on day to day operations! but what about top line revenue or decisions involving investment in equipment, chemicals or services? Well guess what? Many manufacturers have available software programs that track uptime as well as provide a marketing venue. So you are getting ready to invest in new hardware, wouldn't it be important to know what the uptime and cost of the old was? You bet it is, now when you have that conversation with your supplier you're armed with facts, you download all the service and uptime statistics, match this with invoices, initial cost, current value and voila you have an approximate "cost of ownership". It is this kind of data that will more than repay you for the cost and provide valuable management information.

As to the marketing and sales systems available let me say there are lots of companies with clever solutions to about any challenge or want you have. I'd suggest going to the web, do your initial screening and then setting up a time for these providers to demonstrate how they can positively make your life simpler and more profitable by arming you with the facts, just the facts.