

CASH IN ON COCKROACH CONTROL



Learn how to attract and keep customers, and watch general pest management revenue grow.

By **Diane Sofranec** | PMP Senior Editor

Gain control over a cockroach infestation, and your customer will reward you for it with loyalty, referrals and stellar reviews. No one wants these filthy, disease-carrying and allergy-causing pests in their homes or businesses.

Cockroaches are resilient, however, and infestations can be difficult to control. No wonder: They date back about 140 million years, according to the Entomological Society of America (ESA). Fortunately, pest management professionals (PMPs) have plenty of options.

“The key to cockroach control, honestly, is being just as adaptable as they are,” says Josh Fleenor, president, Pest Pros Pest Solutions, Sacramento, Calif. “Don’t get stuck in a ‘this is how we have always done it’ or ‘this always worked before’ mentality.

KNOW YOUR SPECIES

With more than 4,000 species of cockroaches in the world, knowing which one(s) you’re dealing with is imperative. You won’t gain control until you understand the biological habits of the cockroaches you’ve been called out to eliminate.

“Knowing their likes and dislikes, as well as where they are most likely to hide and breed, is key,” says Dennis Mastrolia, CEO, Dennis the Mennis Pest Experts, Lynn, Mass. “Determine what is contributing to the likelihood of them sustaining and reproducing, and eliminate the root causes.”

Use your training to positively identify the pest. If you’re not sure what species you’re dealing with, consult with an entomologist or a



Dennis Mastrolia

university’s entomology department. Reference sources such as *Truman’s Scientific Guide to Pest Management Operations* or the National Pest Management Association’s (NPMA’s) *Field Guide* also are helpful.

INSPECT THOROUGHLY

Because cockroaches prefer dark, out-of-the-way places, a thorough inspection is a must. During your initial inspection of a customer’s home or business, check the spots in which cockroaches are known to hide.

“Get down on your hands and knees, and look with a flashlight,” advises Crystal Boyd, commercial sales manager, Pest Management of Texas, Sachse, Texas. “Check in cracks, crevices, near warm and wet areas — anywhere you think roaches would hide.”

Bill Melville, owner, PRIZM IPM Solutions, West Linn, Ore., agrees. “Always perform a thorough and complete inspection of every location — not just where the client may have seen cockroaches, but all suspect areas where cockroaches may find ideal harborage.”

Cockroaches need water to survive. Damp, dark areas like basements and sewers are good places to start.

“Use your flashlight to light up dark areas where cockroaches may seek out sanitation and structural issues,” says Kent Smith, ACE, owner, A+ Quality Pest Control, Oskaloosa, Iowa. “Find as many



Crystal Boyd

harborages as you can to stay on top of the issue. Take your time.”

Randy Konold, owner of Sodak Pest Control in Watertown, S.D., agrees. “Many technicians hurry through the job and don’t eliminate all of the cockroaches,” he says. “Slow down. In the pest control business, time is money, so we are always in a hurry. But you have to know when to slow down and when to speed up.”

Sometimes, a thorough inspection is nearly impossible. Customers who refuse access to areas, won’t move items or clear out clutter may make your job difficult.

“Lack of a thorough inspection may result in many missed harborages,” says Smith. “This can delay results and create frustrations for customers and PMPs.”

Educating customers is a must. Tell them what they need to do to help you get their infestation under control.

Melville says he meets with the decision maker for the account to discuss the cockroach problem and explain the pest control plan.

“It is easy to determine if they just want a quick treatment, with a report to show the health inspector, or if they are truly committed to working with me to create a pest-free environment,” he says. “Then, we can work together toward proper access, preparation, cleaning, and support from their employees or family members and a long-term commitment to remaining pest-free.”

EDUCATE CUSTOMERS

Because customers often don’t know why they have cockroaches, it helps to explain why the conditions in their homes or businesses are favorable for these pests. For instance, let them know why they must eliminate moisture in the basement or keep their kitchens clean, and then insist they follow through with your guidelines.

“One of the biggest challenges for getting control is customer education,” says Bob Winslow, inspector and service manager, A1 Exterminators, West Harwich, Mass. “Control is a partnership between the PMP and the customer.”

INSIST ON COOPERATION

After your initial inspection, map out a plan your customer can follow to help eliminate conducive conditions. Some PMPs provide easy-to-follow written instructions, whereas others explain in



Kent Smith

detail, face-to-face, what needs to be done. Smith says a combination of both is best.

“Take notes on what steps can be done for the customer to assist in cleaning and keeping competing food sources out of reach of the cockroach population,” he adds. “Don’t just hand them a list, but show them what you are talking about.”

Consider charging a cleaning fee, which includes labor and materials, if customers cannot or will not complete the task themselves, Smith says. Above all, make sure customers are aware that sanitation is key to the control of cockroaches. Ignoring this important step will hamper control efforts.

“If food is left out, dirty dishes are in the sink or dishwasher, and crumbs are on the floor or counters, cockroaches are smart enough to eat at those locations rather than the bait that is left out for them,” says Boyd.

Think twice about working with customers who do not resolve their sanitation issues.

“If they don’t follow good sanitation practices, you have to make the decision to walk away from an account,” says Lee Tubbs, owner, Enviroguard Pest Solutions, Ringgold, Ga.

Lack of cooperation by customers is one of the biggest obstacles to complete control.

“Certainly, the customer will need to follow preparation instructions to enable the service to succeed,” Mastrolia says. “However, this often fails.”

Customers may have no desire to clean up after themselves, be unable to sufficiently remove clutter, or lack the funds to make needed repairs. Working with customers in multi-unit housing presents additional challenges.

“In multi-family situations, it is incredibly important to get everyone on the same page, working together collaboratively to resolve the issue,” says Fleenor. “This isn’t always easy, but it is necessary if you wish to gain long-term control of these situations.”

To facilitate control in multi-unit housing, tenants must immediately report cockroach sightings, building owners must eliminate conducive conditions, and PMPs must have the ability to inspect adjacent units.

“The tricky part is getting everyone on the same page,” Fleenor continues. “Often, tenants do not want to prep — and management just wants you to come in and make the cockroaches go away with as little effort on their part as possible. This isn’t always the case,



Josh Fleenor

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but it is a common theme in properties with high cockroach activity.”

He suggests organizing a meeting with tenants, maintenance staff and property management, and educating them on their roles and responsibilities. Effective communication may result in 100 percent cooperation. All that’s needed is a little training and a lot of knowledge.



Lee Tubbs

“Teach technicians and salespeople the life cycle of roaches, how to identify common roaches and their harborage sites, and the necessary steps for population reduction. Communicate the details of the pest control program and the time it will take to resolve their issue,” says Tubbs. “Explain to customers the reasons for their involvement in the pest control process.”

COMMUNICATE WITH CUSTOMERS

Once you develop your cockroach control protocol, share it with your customers.

“Let your customer know what steps you are taking to help take care of their cockroach issue,” says Smith. “Have a solid game plan, and possibly a back-up plan, to show the value for your service.”

Share the details of the work you plan to do

on the initial visit, and let them know how long it will be before you return for a follow-up visit. Encourage customers to call you if they have questions or if cockroaches appear in places you did not note in your inspection report.

He also advises giving customers your expectations of the results that should occur over the next few service calls.

“For example, if you are baiting for cockroaches, explain that they may actually see more activity over the next few days, as cockroaches come out to feed on the bait you placed,” says Smith.

Tubbs agrees. “Always explain to customers what they can expect after your service call,” he says. “Follow up with your customers by telephone or in person, and remind them of how your program works.”

TOOLS FOR CONTROL

PMPs have several tools in their cockroach control arsenal. Many are simple and reliable products that have worked for decades.

One tried-and-true tool is the vacuum. It allows you to collect cockroaches out of hard-to-reach cracks and crevices. It also eliminates dead cockroaches, cast skins, droppings and other debris.

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ATTRACTING COCKROACH CUSTOMERS

Gaining control over cockroach infestations is only part of the challenge for many pest management professionals (PMPs). Attracting customers can be a struggle, too.

For Matt Blair, a pest control technician with Tri State Pest Control, Wheeling, W.Va., customer referrals are a powerful sales tool.

“Always do right by the customer, and business will follow,” he says. “Customers are the only reason we are in business.”

Referrals tend to come easy when customers are satisfied with your work. That’s why it’s important to set expectations during the initial inspection. Tell customers how many service calls you expect it will take to get their pest problem under control and let them know this is simply an estimate. Clearly communicate why their cooperation is critical to the pest control process.

Be careful not to overpromise your ability to gain complete control. Some cockroach jobs are more difficult than others, and it’s best to explain that to customers during your initial meeting. Don’t be afraid to be honest with your customers. It’s better to set realistic expectations during your initial service call than to lose an unsatisfied customer who has the potential to damage your reputation.

Consider offering incentives to current customers

who offer referrals. It may encourage satisfied customers to share the favorable experience they had with your company.

Also, do not hesitate to explain the drawbacks of going the do-it-yourself route. Stress that your certification

and years of training make you an expert at finding and eliminating cockroaches. Let them know the products you use are for professionals only and therefore more effective. If they don’t listen, politely remind them you will be available should they require your expertise later.

Further your training to learn the latest cockroach control techniques. Attend pest management industry conferences, webinars and/or product demonstrations to ensure you’re providing the best service possible. Reach out to experts, such as entomologists or longtime PMPs, for advice. Let customers know you are knowledgeable, experienced and above all, professional.

“Let great results and word-of-mouth support your marketing efforts,” advises Josh Fleenor, president, Pest Pros Pest Solutions, Sacramento, Calif. — DS



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“I perform a thorough vacuuming of the premises initially, in all suspected cockroach areas,” says Melville. “This allows my baiting to be more effective, and makes it easier to assess any new activity on my subsequent follow-up inspections and visits.”

Another useful tool in the quest for cockroach control is the monitor, or sticky trap.

“Insect monitors are your eyes 24/7 for pest activity, and will give you clues if used correctly,” says Smith.

These low-cost devices are especially useful when first assessing the infestation, explains Melville, because each one will tell you a story. You can learn a lot by noting which caught adults, which have nymphs, which direction they entered the monitor, and of course, which monitors show no activity at all.

“By monitoring thoroughly prior to treatment, I am better able to direct our preparation and treatment efforts to areas where these efforts will be most beneficial, and produce the desired results — 100 percent elimination of the infestation,” says Melville. “Also, the effective placement and use of monitors after gaining control lets me quickly identify new introductions.”

Monitors also may be helpful in showing the source of cockroaches before an infestation

occurs. For example, German cockroaches (*Blattella germanica*) are known to hitch a ride in shipments of boxes and crates.

“In the event cockroaches are being transported into the structure, eliminating the source *before* they’re introduced into the building is paramount,” says Philip Smith, president, Compass Pest Management, Cornelia, Ga. “After identification, inspection, and corrective actions have been employed, using good baits or pesticides labeled for cockroaches is the final step to a successful control program.”

PMPs have found that when it comes to cockroaches, pesticides alone do not ensure control. Success depends on several factors.

“Gaining and maintaining control starts with sanitation and eliminating conducive conditions, and ends with the proper application of materials labeled for cockroaches while monitoring and measuring results over time,” he says. “This almost always requires customer cooperation. If the customer will not cooperate, refer them to your best competitor.” PMP

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MORE ONLINE

For more cockroach coverage, including tips to reduce callbacks, visit PMPPestTalk.net.

IT'S RAINING ROACHES, HALLELUJAH

Philip Smith, president of Compass Pest Management, Cornelia, Ga., launched his pest control company in 1995. Since then, Smith, whose pest management career spans more than a quarter century, has had his share of challenging cockroach jobs. But one job in particular stands out.



Philip Smith

Church officials hired him to help out with a German cockroach (*Blattella germanica*) infestation at a home in which a disabled woman and her adult special-needs children lived.

“Once I entered the house to complete the inspection, I soon realized I could hardly breathe due to the stench of roaches and pet feces,” he relates. “When I treated the crown molding around the rooms, so many roaches were falling to the floor it sounded like it was raining inside.”

Because of the home’s serious, irreparable structural condition and the severity of the sanitation issue, Smith advised church officials to not only move the family out of the house, but to ask the city to condemn the structure. They did; the city used the home to train firefighters, who burned it to the ground. — DS



Above, crown molding made ideal harborage for the German cockroaches. Right, feces, cast skins and debris made the house uninhabitable.

PHOTOS: PHILIP SMITH