

Three service fleets are responding to high fuel costs by using available technology to route drivers and rethinking the old rules of sales and service calls.

BY TARIQ KAMAL

FINDING WAYS TO REDUCE FUEL spend will always be among a fleet manager's top priorities. While the debate over alternative fuels and hybrid powertrains rages on, there is a less-scientific and often-overlooked solution: Drive fewer miles.

Using readily available tools and technology, three diverse service industry fleets are limiting time spent on the road through route consolidation, vehicle right sizing, Internet estimating and online mapping.

While these companies are national and multinational, their franchisees are local business owners with a mandate to manage their work vehicles as efficiently as possible. These fuel-saving tips can be applied to fleets large and small.

OFFER SAME-DAY DISCOUNTS

AdvantaClean Systems Inc. is a Huntersville, N.C.-based provider of in-home services including air duct cleaning and mold removal as well as emergency fire- and flood-damage repair.

Jeff Dudan, CEO, estimates that fuel can swing from 3 to 5 percent of his franchisees' per-vehicle revenue, depending on pump prices. "Two percent of your top line is a big piece of your bottom line," he says.

The company encourages technicians to consolidate customer visits by offering same-day service discounts. For instance, if the customer is scheduled for mold removal, the technician will offer a price cut to clean the customer's dryer vents instead of returning for a new visit down the line.

QUALIFY FIRST

AdvantaClean's call-center staff is taking steps to better qualify the job



ROUTING REVOLUTION

over the phone before handing it off to the technician.

There was a time when the primary objective was to get to the caller's location in the hopes that meeting face-to-face would give the tech a better chance to get the work, Dudan explains. "Now we try to weed out jobs that aren't really for us," he says, "but they might be for a referral partner such as a waterproofing buddy or pest control guy."

HAND OFF THE JOB

Traditionally, sales people are protective of their territories. This is changing in the new economy. Dudan reports that technicians with jobs in undefined sales territories are now more willing to hand the work off to another franchisee closer to the job site.

ESTIMATE ON THE PHONE

Fibrenew, a company specializing in leather and plastic repair and restoration with locations across the United States and Canada, takes pre-qualification one step further. The company's vice president of education, Dan Danforth, realized several years

ago that many on-site inspections of potential restoration jobs could be performed over the phone.

Fibrenew's telephone estimates have racked up an 85 to 90 percent success rate, resulting in countless saved trips. "[That] saves a lot of time," Danforth says. "And less windshield time means more money."

Part of their success relies on photos taken by clients' digital cameras or cell phones and sent via e-mail. The photographs give a more accurate, visual representation of the problem and also help technicians decide whether they'll need to move the repair to an offsite shop. This saves restorers from having to drive a large truck or van in the chance they'd need to transport a large piece of furniture.

RECONFIRM THE CALL

Because Fibrenew schedules jobs for its restorers in a tight, two-hour window, the company reconfirms each appointment the day before. Though this seems like a given, the initiative has saved countless wasted trips — Danforth estimates that 15 to 20 percent of Fibrenew's clients had forgotten the appointment time.

CONSOLIDATE TRIPS

The last thing Peter Ross, owner and founder of **Senior Helpers**, wants to do is create more travel expense for the company's 10,000 home caregivers in North America and Australia and raise prices for its elderly clients.

The goal is for Senior Helpers' caregivers to make fewer trips. The key part is working with clients and their families, who pay a per-mile charge, by avoiding scheduling doctor's appointments during rush hour and consolidating non-essential errands on a travel day.

"We're not just going out and driving across town today and then across town tomorrow when we could have done them both at the same time," Ross says.

Ross also discourages clients from requesting long rides, which result in an added charge of \$10 to \$15 per four-hour shift. "We're trying to avoid passing on anything we can to the families," Ross says.

Many of Fibrenew's franchisees have elected to tow trailers as needed rather than drive large trucks on every trip.

USE DIGITAL MAPS

Senior Helpers uses a home healthcare industry software program called Generations. The software is integrated with Microsoft MapPoint, which can create a complete route schedule based on a caregiver's skill sets and clients' locations. The program can e-mail directions directly to a smartphone.

At Fibrenew, franchisees are routing jobs using My Maps, a free, customizable feature of Google Maps. Users can plan a whole week's worth of routes as well as add text, embed photos and videos and see maps from a satellite view on Google Earth.



Nonetheless, digital maps are not always accurate. Caroline Johannes, a New Jersey-based Senior Helper caregiver, reports any issues to the home office. "We're encouraged to share things such as quicker shortcuts or road closures for the next caregiver," she says.

HITCH A TRAILER

Danforth at Fibrenew has convinced some franchisees to move from bigger trucks and vans to smaller vehicles and a trailer. The enclosed trailers — similar to small U-Haul cargo trailers — can be pulled by many passenger car models and act as great mobile billboards. For Fibrenew's purposes, a used \$1,500 trailer will do the job just fine, Danforth says. Simple hitches run about \$400.

Danforth says franchisees will dedicate two or three days a month to pickups and deliveries with the trailer. "Why drive a big truck around when you only need it 10 percent of the time?" he asks. "The amount of fuel you save is incredible."

RIGHT SIZE YOUR VEHICLE

While AdvantaClean technicians need greater capacity than Fibrenew's specialists, they are also right sizing vehicles to the task. Like Fibrenew, some AdvantaClean technicians are opting to use trailers for emergency equipment, which they might only need for a few trips per month.

Many franchisees are also moving away from the traditional box truck, heavy-duty pickup or cargo van to more fuel-efficient vehicles such as the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter van.

The Sprinter lends the company a modern image from a branding perspective, Dudan says, and the high-roof model can double as a mobile workstation. AdvantaClean will wire the Sprinter so technicians can create and print estimates and contracts on site, saving trips back to a brick-and-mortar location.

"[Our franchisees] really don't have a staff," says Dudan. "So basically, [the Sprinter] is their office when they start their businesses." **BF**