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Jack of All Trades

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Understanding the benefits of exterior services management

Exterior services management (ESM) may benefit restaurants and other retail-based stores with hundreds of locations in multiple states. ESM typically includes snow and ice removal, landscaping, parking lot maintenance and dark store management.

Over the past decade, large chain restaurants have gravitated toward outsourcing exterior services for their multiple locations in various states. This frees the site managers to focus more on selling, customer service, operations and the overall guest experience. The marketplace has embraced ESM companies, and restaurateurs have realized they can eliminate the fragmented and sometimes chaotic nature of dealing with multiple vendors providing multiple services—especially when the portfolio includes locations across the country.

Most ESM companies work with pre-qualified contractors who have undergone extensive ground checks. These contractors, because of the volume of business, offer the ESM company the lowest cost per service. The ESM provider is responsible for invoicing, quality control, renegotiating contracts, specification preparation and billing disputes and is often the buffer for legal actions.

Over the years, ESM has become an industry standard for restaurant managers trying to benchmark quality assurance for landscaping, snow/ice removal, parking lot maintenance and dark store management for locations ranging from 50 to 1,000. With an ESM partner, companies with multiple locations in multiple states can avoid paying hundreds of invoices every month, struggling with insurance claims, chasing contractors and being penalized with city violations. ESM companies have consolidated a fragmented industry. And with the latest technology, ESM is becoming even more organized with increased levels of quality assurance.

Keeping Up With Technology

Over the last five years, we are seeing more portal sites and mobile applications that connect the client with real-time reports of before-and-after photos of rendered services. Cloud-based environments and mobile applications are enhancing the overall operations of many national and global restaurant brands when it comes to knowing and managing exterior assets.

The first mobile ESM applications tended to be simpler in design and are beginning to show some outdated specifications. However, a number of ESM companies are taking full advantage of new technology and gearing up to launch some pretty useful tools in 2015. As many ESM companies gain insight from their oldest and most respected clients, they appear to be doing some reverse engineering with some of the larger brands and working together to optimize the latest mobile technology.

As you seek out mobile applications and portals in the ESM market space, make sure you download and test each one. As cool as they may look, they might not handle or deliver what you need. Make sure their platforms and automated processes to gather and calculate exterior asset inventories are based on real-time numbers and not uncertain third-party content.

Clients want pertinent information, such as actual square footage, identified dark stores or legitimate before-and-after photos. Fewer ESM professionals are visiting locations and relying more on GPS data and imagery/stats obtained from third-party organizations such as Google. Only actual site visits can verify asset inventories, dark stores and a plethora of other unknowns that simply are not being reported by satellites and video cars.

Risk Management Matters

Any ESM worth their salt will have a solid handle on risk management and be able to discuss your concerns in great detail. Make sure to look at all legal aspects with regard to your exterior service needs.

A reputable ESM company knows the importance of controlling liability issues and can focus on reducing the customer's exposure. It can manage this very important aspect and provide one policy to its customer. Your people will no longer be chasing dozens of certificates of insurance and attempting to verify proper coverage. Your risk management and/or legal departments will be impressed with your decision to manage the company's exposure in this way.

With the ESM company managing your national or regional exterior needs, there is one entity with one umbrella policy. Contractors are all managed by this entity, and the ESM assumes all the responsibility, gets the job done correctly and allows for your company's peace of mind. It is the job of the ESM company to collect all the insurance paperwork from contractor partners, and any associated vendors performing the exterior services on all your locations. The safety of your patrons should always be the top priority of any ESM company.

It's Never Too Late

It's a new year, and you may have missed some goals in the fourth quarter. Not to worry; some of these ESM quick tips will get you back on track. Refer to these when making the exterior service decisions that will impact the next season or when your current exterior service plan is failing you:

- Logistical considerations can be eliminated by implementing a mid-season action plan and MAP, and thorough site assessment.
- Contractual concerns can be addressed through ESM portfolio analysis, specification development and liability assurance.
- Budgetary impact can be alleviated by an ESM company through cost analysis and service selection, which often results in savings.
- Seasonal considerations are eliminated by a MAP and allow for a smooth transition that provides seamless customer service.

Making Your New Year's Resolution Come True

There will also be new and continued challenges for your exterior services. You can continue to devote your valuable time and energy to multi-site contract management while processing hundreds of invoices and not be assured of liability and quality, or you can rely on an ESM company to eliminate your exterior service concerns and focus on other New Year's resolutions.

If the ESM model sounds like the right solution for you, start by searching the Web for some respected ESM companies. Look for one with consistent experience, quality assurance, the latest mobile technology, long-standing client retention and 24/7 support. You should be able to short-list some pretty solid contenders to handle all your ESM needs regionally and nationwide.