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Planning Perimeter Pest Control

 By R. Scott McNeely
smcneely@pctonline.com
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In today's marketplace there is increasing emphasis toward exterior perimeter pest control service. Where do you stand in this growing market?

How often do we take the time to put ourselves in the shoes of our potential customers? If you seriously think about it, chances are, not as often as we should. Several calls made to a few pest control companies about starting a service program can result in a potential customer hearing about a smorgasbord of differing service plans. Areas of coverage can vary widely from inside only to exterior only and just about any combination in between. On top of all that there's the service frequency ranging from monthly to yearly. They may or may not care about the details of exactly what we're going to do or how often we're going to come out to prevent them from having a problem. Most of the folks that call us simply don't like bugs and really just want to get their problem taken care of. They do, however, want to work with a company that they believe can be trusted to take care of their problem for them.

In today's marketplace there has been an increasing shift in emphasis toward exterior perimeter service at the homes and businesses we treat. This shift is taking place for a number of reasons. Some of these include increased effectiveness in baits, traps and monitoring devices that limit the need for extensive interior treatments; litigation on interior pesticide applications; regulatory requirements limiting what types of pest control services may or may not be rendered; difficulty in obtaining access to the interior of homes due to customer work schedules; a shift in priority of service targeting insect pests that originate from the exterior; and products that are now available that have an extended ability to provide control in an exterior environment. In this article we'll take a closer look at planning and delivery of perimeter service strategies for both residential and commercial customers.

Overcoming Preconceived Ideas. A number of years ago I was with a technician in a home owned by two sisters that were retired schoolteachers. When the technician began servicing their home I was amazed to see one of the sisters going ahead of the technician pulling back blinds, cleaning out closets and pulling back furniture as the other sister would go behind the technician putting everything back in place. Several years later our company implemented a new service program that emphasized interior inspection and monitoring and exterior inspection and treatment. As I was thinking about the potential for customers to balk at a change in their service programming, the two retired sisters came to mind. Several months later I asked the technician how his new service programming had gone at the retired sisters' home. He replied by saying, "you wouldn't believe it." He then went on to say that one of the sisters said, "I sure am glad that we won't need to do so much work inside the house any more when you come out."

It's clear that in this case my preconceived thought of these two ladies not accepting a change in their routine or service programming was completely wrong. At times, our employees (or ourselves) can be our own worst enemies when implementing a positive change in service program protocol. This obstacle can be largely overcome through proper planning, extensive training and making sure that everyone who is involved "buys into" what the changes are going to be and how they will take place.

Focusing In. I believe that there are several consistent strategies, or principles, that you can use to address the delivery of pest control service programming. One of the first considerations you may want to address is a uniform inspection and treatment protocol for standardized service delivery. In order to accomplish this, first address service needs by focusing in on areas throughout any structure that require similar inspection and service procedures. In the case of a residential account you may want to consider using a six-part inspection and service zone approach. The zones inside a residence include the interior "living area" (all finished areas of the home) and the interior "non-living areas" (garages, unfinished basements, utility rooms, attics and crawlspaces). On the exterior of a structure, concentrate on four inspection and service zones. These include "travel corridors," "inside the drip line," "the perimeter" and "resource sites." In commercial accounts, the interior service zones will differ from one account to another depending on the type of business. The exterior inspection and treatment zones on the commercial accounts should closely parallel the residential approach.

Travel Corridors. When I think of travel corridors relating to pest control services, one of the first things that comes to mind is how rodents will follow fence lines, walls or edges that lead them directly to the exterior of a structure. Many arthropod pests that will invade or live on the outside of a home normally follow "edges" during their travels. In most areas of the country, several different ant species have become the No. 1 structure-invading pest that pest control operators are facing. Inspection of travel corridors to aid in the location of nest sites, as well as baiting or treatment of these sites, can be extremely important in order to eliminate or obtain control of ants as well as many other potential pests.

When you first drive up to an account you should begin an overview assessment process. A technician should observe the overall setting of the home or business. He or she should then begin making a mental note of all obvious travel corridors. This will include points such as the edges of drives and sidewalks, fences, walls and overhead utility lines or tree limbs touching the structure. While making a closer examination for potential travel corridors, all "edge" areas should be closely inspected. This includes pulling back and looking closely at areas such as where the sod or mulch meets the structure. Cracks in pavement or the junctions where pavement, porches or decks contact the structure are also prime travel areas. Shrubbery or other plantings that have grown to the point where they are physically touching the structure may also provide key travel routes. On the structure, any point where two differing construction elements, (such as siding and brick) meet creates a natural travel corridor for pest travel. In the case of ants, the travel corridor may be directly under the overlap of the siding and go undetected unless a close inspection is made. A technician should always think three dimensionally and keep in mind that a number of insect pests such as silverfish, ants and cockroaches will inhabit and follow the edges around the roofline/soffit area, under the edges of fascia boards and the gutters. Observations should also be made for exterior sealing and exclusion needs. A tube of caulking or a few pieces of stuffing mesh can often go a long way in preventing recurrence of an interior pest concern, plus reduce your dependence on pesticide applications.

Inside the Drip Line. I like to refer to "inside the drip line" as any area that is around the immediate perimeter of a structure and protected by a roof or porch overhang. This inspection and treatment zone is critically important and often slighted by technicians providing "exterior perimeter service." It's easy to get in the habit of treating a band around the base of a structure and missing the "detail work" that may save getting a callback for extra service.

The area inside the drip line consists of three different surfaces that should affect your selection of

what pesticides may be used when treatment is needed. These areas include the ground area immediately adjacent to the structure inside the "drip line," the vertical wall surfaces and the underside of the roof or porch overhang. When applying a liquid insecticide on the exterior perimeter using an electric or gasoline powered spray rig, many companies will apply a lower concentration (or percentage) of a material and a higher total volume of material. In the case of mulched or grassed areas, this is probably a reasonable treatment strategy. In the case of the areas inside the drip line, if a technician is treating with a liquid pesticide, he or she should consider using lower volume liquid treatments at the higher labeled rates. This is especially true when making a liquid treatment on vertical surfaces or the undersides of overhangs. In these cases, simply a higher volume of liquid will not adhere to a surface and it is harder to deliver a satisfactory concentration of active material to the target site.

It may be that your company has made a decision to limit or avoid exterior perimeter "power spraying treatments." In these cases, exterior "detail work" will be the key to your success. Inside the drip line, the use of insecticide baits and dusts may also be maximized due to some protection from moisture and direct sunlight. Protected areas of "resource sites" (discussed later in this article) may also be addressed using a "detailed approach" vs. relying on power spraying treatments.

The Perimeter. I've talked with many pest control operators who have told me that they provided "perimeter treatments" at their accounts. Often when asked what they do, the reply goes something like, "we treat two feet up on the foundation and a five to 10 foot band around the entire building." Using only this generic treatment approach can leave a lot of gaps in a sound inspection and perimeter service program. For evaluation purposes, I like to refer to the "perimeter zone" as an area adjacent to a structure beginning at the "drip line" and extending out continuously for a five to 10+ foot area surrounding the structure. This immediate perimeter area will vary depending on the type of pest pressures and landscaping that is in place.

Both inside the drip line and in the perimeter zone it may be beneficial for a technician to be equipped with a four-prong potato rake or stiff-toothed rake. At times it may be necessary to move pine needles or other types of mulch in order to get access to inspect for and treat insects living under these materials. The type of ground cover present and the targeted insect pest should also be taken into account when making a pesticide selection for treating these areas.

Perimeter Resource Sites. When you were a kid and wanted to go hunt for bugs, where did you look? I know that I always seemed to have some of my best luck by turning over rocks and logs. Well, this is one thing that really hasn't changed. Many of the insect pests that we are dealing with today are going to be located in the environmental niches that best meet their requirements for food, shelter and moisture.

Keeping this in mind, I like to define a perimeter resource site as simply any area adjacent to the structure, on the customer's property, or even the neighbors' property, that creates a condition that can support or attract a potential pest to the area. From those areas, animals or insects may find their way up to, on or into, the customer's home or business. Some of these conditions may include: cavities in trees, heavily landscaped areas in the yard, retaining walls, stepping stones, gutter splash guards, wood piles, utility buildings, high weed growth, etc. Inspecting these areas, making recommendations to the property owner and providing necessary treatments all add value to your service program and may save you an extra service call. We also need to keep in mind that even conditions on the neighbors' property adjacent to your customer may be providing the source for the problem you are fighting at your account. In these cases you may be faced with a sales prospect or even asking permission to provide a courtesy service.

Exterior "Sensitive Areas." About a year ago I received a call from a concerned customer asking about what type of treatments we had made when we were providing service at her home. She went on to explain that she had a daughter with allergies and was concerned that her daughter

may contact the insecticide that was "sprayed" outside, or that the insecticide that was used outside might be tracked into the living area.

Fortunately I was able to explain about the materials and techniques that had been used and the concerned customer was satisfied with the answers to her questions. I'm sure many of you can remember back when areas like nurseries, around an aquarium or the interior of kitchen cabinets were all considered "sensitive areas" in a home. In today's workplace, all pest control operators should be aware that anywhere we apply pesticides in or on the property of a customer, including the exterior, should be considered as potential "sensitive areas."

Many problems that have occurred associated with exterior pesticide treatments could have been avoided if the technician had only taken the time to ask the property owner a few questions. Technicians should always be on the lookout for such things as: goldfish ponds and water gardens, bird feeders and baths, vegetable and herb gardens (which may consist of only a few individual plants), paved surfaces, pets, air-handling units, flowering plants and play areas. If there is ever a question about whether to treat or not, the technician should always get his or her question answered prior to making any pesticide application in that area.

Knowing Your Materials. When they are on site at their accounts I always like to ask technicians what they are going to do and why. It is critically important that technicians have a thorough knowledge of the potential pests they may encounter, inspection techniques and a complete knowledge of the materials and application techniques they may use. It is also important to be able to anticipate pest pressures that may occur prior to the next scheduled service. This is increasingly important when the frequency of scheduled service is on a quarterly or less frequent basis. It can be hard to visualize ants crawling up the foundation into a customer's home on a freezing day in February, however, depending on where you live, March and April may be two of your biggest months for ant calls.

A Word of Caution. Currently in our industry there is a growing trend in moving towards a perimeter service emphasis. Ease in scheduling and increased productivity sounds great when referring to just a few of the benefits of a perimeter only service program. Some folks are offering an initial interior/exterior service program with scheduled exterior *only* service after that, while others are offering exterior service with the customer having the option to request interior service. On the down side, these type of service approaches take the trained eye out of the core area that we are actually being paid to protect. We all know that both insects and rodents are great hitchhikers. Stored product pests, fabric infesting insects and even cockroaches are transported in or fly into structures. When making your programming decisions you should keep these facts in mind.

Conclusion. If you are going to stay abreast of your competition in today's market you need to closely evaluate you present and ongoing services that you offer to your customers. In order to improve and continue moving forward the saying "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" cannot apply. If you are not open minded, progressive and responsive to the needs of your customers and potential customers, then chances are good that you will be left far behind your competition.

The author is president of McNeely Pest Control, Winston-Salem, N.C. He can be reached at smcneely@pctonline.com.

SIDEBAR:

LITERATURE OFFERED ABOUT FIRE ANT CONTROL

A brochure about the control of red and black imported fire ants is now available from Aventis Environmental Science. The six-page color brochure, called A Guide to the New Generation of Imported Fire Ant Controls, is offered free to all pest control operators.

According to Aventis' Mike McDermott, the literature offers detailed descriptions of red and black imported fire ants, their lifecycle, the mounds in which they live, the damage their sting can cause, eating and mating habits and several detailed control recommendations.

"Red and black imported fire ants are not only dangerous to humans, but their nesting activity damages roads, graves, agricultural crops, equipment and structures," McDermott said. "The damage they cause to the earth can also impact other wildlife such as ground nesting birds."

The literature also details four different recommended strategies for imported fire ant control including mound drenching, mound dust applications, broadcast treatments and spot and barrier treatments.

Call 201/307-9700 for information on how to order the Aventis fire ant brochure.

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