PROCESSES > SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS

Many people believe that software solves problems. In actuality, it is solid processes that solve problems and create consistent results. Implementing software without standard processes in place often results in greater chaos. As you grow, consider how the two work together as you seek solutions to expedite tasks.

Software benefits

The role of software in a business application is to increase the speed at which tasks can be completed and increase the volume of those tasks completed at the same time. Today's software is often configurable to a certain degree, allowing it to perform certain tasks in more than one way. The greater the flexibility of the software, the more tasks it can be leveraged to automate; but the implementor must have a clear process to execute the use case for the software to complete the task correctly.

Regardless of the task (e.g., invoicing, payroll review, estimate generation, etc.), a defined standard process – not the software – creates efficiency. Without the processes in place, the software will simply increase the speed at which your team can create erroneous data.

Prep first, then implement

A lot of software companies will tell you that it will take 3-4 months to implement their software. While I agree with that timeline, it doesn't begin until a set of defined standard processes exist. Otherwise, you will spend an incalculable number of months post-implementation cleaning up the mess of data that will be created by increasing the speed of tasking without ensuring everyone is doing things the same way for the same reason.

Spend the time to define how things should get done first; compare that to the ways the software might work; and then determine a final process that is compatible with the system as you begin to implement. The middle step is important for those who already have processes in place. Not all processes can be accommodated by every system. Most "off-the-shelf" solutions come with limitations to executing tasks. This means you may have to adjust your process to accommodate the system.

If you plan to adopt new technology and software in your business, don't get caught up in flashy silver discs that promise to solve all your problems. Focus first on the process(es) within your business to standardize and document the way things get done. Then find a software that fits well with automating those processes. In the end, this approach will help you increase your team's capacity and provide efficient, effective, consistent results.

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TECHNOLOGY GAME PLAN

Before investing in software, apps or other technologies, outline the data you need to track and look closely at your most redundant daily functions. A solution that will add speed, value, accuracy and financial gain to your business is worth considering. Select the top two or three areas that you would like to improve and research what products and opportunities are available to help you address these items.

Ensure your choice supports your needs and that using it doesn't create more work instead of less. Keep in mind ease of use, customer support, availability of technology updates and availability of user training for employees. Not every solution is right for every company. Don't jump quickly until you evaluate whether it's a good fit and you can justify the ROI.

Common areas where software solutions can make a difference:

- Payroll
- Mobile time tracking
- Fleet tracking
- Managing and tracking remote workers or subcontractors
- Work orders
- Human resources
- Property measurement
- Customer relationship management (CRM)
- Enterprise resource planning (ERP), which ties most, if not all, of these items together

SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Build brand awareness and customer awareness online

Start with a strategy

There is no escaping the fact that today's consumers (i.e., your potential clients) are more reliant on websites and social marketing in their decision-making processes than they have ever been. For contractors to market effectively, web presence and a social media strategy are paramount.

Your website is your chance to make the best first impression. Without a web presence, you're missing out on opportunities to capture business as more and more customers are turning to internet searches to find service providers.

A complementary component to your web presence is your social media strategy. Here is an overview of the top platforms for newer companies and how to boost your brand and customer experience on each:

LinkedIn
Use your personal profile to make connections and share and discuss relevant topics with like-minded snow professionals. Use your LinkedIn business page to post updates about your business and the industry. **Tip:** Follow SIMA's LinkedIn page for key industry updates!

Facebook
Especially for a smaller company, Facebook is a good place to start with a company page. Many local customers reach out to businesses through Facebook instead of phone or email. Promote your page and use it to showcase your company, engage with customers and build relationships. **Tip:** Keep your personal and your company accounts separate.

Instagram
You might not think much about Instagram beyond your personal use, but as the fastest-growing social network, millions of people are using it every day. This naturally creates an opportunity for businesses. The images and videos we capture in this industry are perfect for the platform — especially during a snow event.

Twitter
This platform is ideal to provide service updates to clients and visually show your teams in action. Our industry is actually perfect for breaking news (about the weather), and interesting photos and videos (who doesn't love big iron in action!) that are exactly the sort of things that can quickly "go viral" or get enormous exposure.
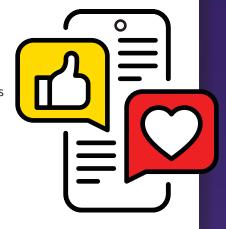
TikTok
This platform isn't just for the latest dance-offs or TikTok challenge. Done well, it's an opportunity to showcase your brand in a fun, entertaining way.

PROTECT YOUR ONLINE REPUTATION

Customers are increasingly searching online to find and rate their snow and ice management service provider. It is crucial that you take control of how your business appears online. When it comes to the effects of mismanaging your company's reputation, it can be like hitting a patch of black ice out on the open road; you never see the worst coming, but when it happens, it's out of your control. It's not just about protecting your good name, either. Improving your rating and review scores online can dramatically increase your revenues.

Consistently solicit reviews. After every invoice, personally ask your customer to leave a review on your website or profile. The more often customers leave reviews, the less likely one poor one will hurt you.

Monitor major profiles. Getting a bad review or public complaint will happen, so it's important that you constantly monitor what is being said about your company on your business profiles and social networks. If something negative is posted, respond in a positive, professional, pleasant manner. Invite anyone with an issue to contact you privately; and for everyone else, thank them for the insight, express appreciation for their attention and answer their questions.

Have a plan for negative reviews. Be quick with a response to any online complaints. Always look to acknowledge that the company cares and will look into the matter. Never duke it out in public with a customer. You both leave with black eyes.

Don't forget to promote positive. Every time a customer leaves a positive review it is an opportunity for you to promote those kudos through other channels such as your website, newsletters and social media.

TIPS: IMPROVE YOUR SOCIAL PRESENCE

- Use images and videos in your posts. Content with relevant images leads to 94% more shares than similar content without images.

- Everything you share should be relevant to your company/clients, but that doesn't mean it should be all about you. You want to be seen as a reliable information source, but that doesn't mean only posting about how great your company is at managing snow.

RESOURCE:

4 Ways Your Digital Presence Can Clear a Path to new Customers. Learn more about website best practices, search engine optimization, business profiles, advertising and more.

https://tinyurl.com/snowexdigitalpath

TECH MAKES SERVICE VERIFICATION EASIER

Service verification…it's a process that you can't live without in today's snow and ice management world. Your customers demand it; and your business will be better off for it.

Don't mistake service verification as just service documentation. As you evaluate your service verification systems, consider how your processes drive your business forward in the following areas: client accountability, billing and payroll management, risk management, production rate/job costing, and strategic differentiation.

And before you think that service verification is too complex or costly to undertake, know that technology can make the process easier and more accurate. Following are some tech tools to consider implementing:

Photos and videos
Preseason photographs and reporting create a baseline for how the property has been maintained. They expose needed repairs and/or potential hazards, immediately reducing the risk that an incident becomes your responsibility. In season, documentation validates services rendered and demonstrates a pattern of reasonable care.

The cloud
Use the cloud as a virtual file cabinet, where multiple users can access forms, upload photos and video, and more – anytime, anywhere.

GPS
Track your team's progress in real time, schedule and dispatch, sync to invoice systems, and allow customers to monitor progress to improve customer service and operational efficiencies. The highest use of GPS systems can even show when plows drop, spreaders engage, etc., to verify service.

Time clock technology
No more manual timesheets that are incomplete, incorrect or crumpled on the floorboard of the plow truck. There are several relatively inexpensive solutions available that provide trusted payroll information in real-time – and can prove when your crew arrived and departed the site.

Smartphones & apps
Texts, photos and video capabilities allow improved communication and documentation. Apps can be used to improve reporting and tracking, often in real-time.

Geofencing
Consider digital mapping technologies that offer geofencing, which creates a virtual barrier that allows people to see activity on site and improve service documentation.

Visit **www.sima.org/startup** for all Snow Startup resources.