



Aquarium Professionals Group

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Industry Issues

Starting an aquarium maintenance company? Take these tips from the Pros!



You work in an aquarium store and/or own an aquarium, and you've heard about aquarium maintenance companies that are charging \$40.00 to \$75.00 an hour, plus materials. You think to yourself: "Hmmm . . . I could do that!" Maybe you ordered and read one of those brochures that teach you how to start an aquarium service business, and it sure sounds easy enough. You think you have what it takes to clean aquariums, you have a little money saved, and you're ready to begin. All we ask is that you know a little about the business end first. Read this page. We're not going to teach you how, but we will describe many of the pitfalls you probably haven't considered. You may change your mind, which just might save you a lot of money and aggravation.

Don't believe the hype!

It's not all peaches and cream! Aquarium maintenance can seem like a gold mine, but it's important to remember that all businesses face daily and on-going problems that cost time and money to solve. An aquarium business can face the same problems, only worse, because we deal with living aquatic animals that are easily damaged or killed. This is not a business of cleaning aquariums but a business of managing aquariums. This means you need a good working knowledge of everything there is to know about aquaria. To complicate matters, you have to depend on the aquarium owner to not do anything wrong - and not to blame you for something they did. Think about the problems you've had with your aquarium. Now think about how you're going to solve fifty other people's aquarium problems, usually at no charge. Yes, that's right! We said "at no charge." Remember that as someone else's aquarium caretaker, you will usually be held responsible if a problem occurs. No one's going to pay you to solve a problem that they think you caused. Aquarium maintenance clients are not fish hobbyists, and many are not willing to educate themselves. You have to know the answers for them.

This is not easy work!

The hours are long. The work is difficult because each aquarium is equipped differently. Water sources are often a long way away from the fish tank. Aquarium emergencies can happen at any time of the day or night. If you have too many clients, the odds are that sooner or later, two of them will make an immediate demand on you at the same time. Our advice: Don't try it alone. Have a partner! Better to split profits than to have splitting headaches.

You have no choice but to operate legitimately.

If you start an aquarium maintenance business, the first thing you'll learn is that you'll have little or no support from the aquarium industry. You'll be in a business that is not truly recognized officially by the industry at large, unless you start out on a very large scale from the beginning. Aquarium retail stores will resent you and may even try to sabotage you or get you black-listed with suppliers. Aquarium supply and livestock distributors will not want to sell to you, sometimes even if you have the proper licenses. They risk alienating the retail stores that make up the bulk of their income. Remember that you're small potatoes. The more legal you make your business, the more respect you'll get, but you'll also face more problems. Starting a small business used to be easy, but federal, state and local government have gone out of their way to make it difficult. The laws governing business are complicated, and professional help is expensive. Sales tax needs to be collected and paid. Business bank accounts require a federal tax identification number. Incorporating may help protect you from lawsuits, but this requires expensive legal help. The list goes on.

Don't rely on incorporation, get yourself some insurance!

This is the biggest mistake made by amateurs that start an aquarium maintenance business. Remember that you'll be working with large volumes of water owned by people wealthy enough to pay you for your services. All you need to do is

make one mistake that floods someone's expensive Parquet floor, and you'll get sued out of business so fast it'll make you dizzy! If the damage is bad enough, you may wind up paying for the rest of your life. And now for the kicker . . . good luck getting insurance! Only a handful of carriers will cover aquarium maintenance companies, and they're going to ask lots of questions about your level of experience and how you'll operate your business. You can't blame them. Water damage is expensive to repair, and claims could be enormous. New to the aquarium industry with only your hobby as experience? Expect outrageously high premiums! Oh, and by the way, don't forget to tell your automobile insurance company you'll be using your vehicle for a business which relies on transportation. If you don't and they find out, they'll drop you like a stone. If you do, they'll more than double your rates. Either way, you'll lose.

Make sure you have capital!

No matter what you've heard or read, you will need money to start up your business. Even if you're working out of your home, you'll still have equipment and inventory to buy. Insurance, legal fees, accounting fees, advertising, phone book listings, and other startup expenses all cost money. Remember that most new businesses don't make a profit for the first four to five years, and you can't do aquarium maintenance for more than six accounts on a part-time basis and work another job. The demand on you will be too great, and what if you get a call for an aquarium emergency while you're at work? Clients won't accept the excuse that you were working. Our recommendation: Don't even try it without at least \$10,000.00 to \$20,000.00 in your bank account. Bank or small business loans? You can try, but your ears will soon be ringing with the laughter you hear as they escort you out the door!

Looked at your competition first?

If there are already plenty of aquarium stores and/or maintenance companies in your area, can you compete? What can you offer that they don't? Do you know more than they do? As a new business, you need to offer competitive rates and guarantees. If you offer guarantees, can you back them up? If you offer the lowest prices, you'll only attract clients who couldn't afford the service if they paid full price. They'll expect more for their money, and if you don't charge enough, you won't make anything.

Think you'll make a lot of money? Don't bank on it!

As we said, most new businesses do not make a profit in their first four to five years of business. You'll be shocked at how quickly the money you make disappears. Most clients won't pay you up front. The more business you have, the more expenses you'll have and the more inventory you'll need. One good vehicle repair bill can set you back for all the profit you've made in a month. Without the vehicle, you're out of business. One mistake which forces you to replace a tank full of saltwater fish, and you could get set back even further. **Retail stores can make more profit on maintenance than a maintenance company.** Why? Because to them, it's gravy. Their entire overhead is paid for by profit made from walk-in business, and the employees they use for aquarium service can also work in the store.

Wait a minute Aquarium Professionals Group - Aren't you an aquarium maintenance business? Why should we believe you?

Although we are one of the largest aquarium maintenance companies in our area, we are primarily a dealer of new aquariums, specializing in very large custom aquarium systems which many retail stores don't want to touch. We provide aquarium maintenance to the clients who buy our aquariums, taking on other, carefully selected maintenance accounts to fill in our routes. We also don't try to make a lot of money on aquarium maintenance. We know better. We make the bulk of our money from designing and installing large custom aquariums, using skills which require many years of experience.