
Local weather changes present small biz opportunities

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November 8, 2011 06:00 AM

There weren't a lot of people who managed to avoid the early season snow storm that came crashing through Massachusetts last week. Power was out across the state, with hundreds of thousands of families having to go "dark ages" and cope with things like gas, charcoal and good old fashioned blankets.

But in driving around in the days prior to and following the storm, one thing was obvious: a number of businesses taking advantage of the fallout by being well prepared. Local grocery stores were packed the day before the storm while gas stations, fast food restaurants and coffee shops all filled up after. Anything that was open and still catering to customers certainly saw a boost in revenue. The question is, how well did your small business prepare for the coming storm? Could you have cashed in by better preparing?

Small business planning includes mapping seasonal trends, but it also means that sometimes you get just a few days to act. Some services are trying to accurately predict coming trends, including weather, to better inform businesses and allow them to make accurate decisions on what to stock and where the demand will be. WeatherTrends360.com analyzes the weather's affect on purchasing habits and predicts weather patterns a full year out. As an example, according to the site, for every one degree drop in temperature in the Boston area, customers are likely to buy one percent more bird seed and 25% more mousetraps. Information like this can be valuable to small business owners looking to gain an edge in servicing the needs of customers based on weather patterns.

There were scores of examples of local area businesses taking advantage of the October snow storm that saw a boost in profits. For example, Harbor Garden Center in Salisbury, MA decided to overstock propane by getting an extra delivery in anticipation of power potentially being out for many customers. "Sunday morning, people started to show up because they had lost electricity. The propane was for cooking on gas grills and for running generators. I figured that we had a 40% increase in revenue from having brought in the extra propane," said owner Tim Lamprey.

The planning wasn't limited to actual brick and mortar stores. Service industries like tree removal/cutting, plumbing and plowing all saw an early season boost to the bottom line, especially those willing to work on the weekends. Allen Plumbing, a Boston area plumbing company that has been in business for 20 years, took extra steps like stocking up on boiler and heating components. As fragile heating systems often fail when pushed to the brink, these components are needed. They also make sure trucks have pipe thawing machines on board at all times, while additional staff worked over the weekend to help scores of customers, rather than forcing them to wait until Monday, according to owner Michael Allen.

Not surprisingly, many local businesses take a more "profits be damned" approach to preparing for emergency situations, embracing the concept of helping the community regardless. "If we fail to execute (on our planning), we would lose business to our competitors. More importantly, we feel we would lose faith in our current customer base that relies on us to be one of their relief centers," said Jeremy Ahearn of Ahearn Power Equipment in Spencer, MA, a full service dealership that sells, service, and rents all types of power equipment. "The mentality of the organization typically is not centered on making profits on these storms. The needs and emotions of the customer tend to put us in a "help in any way possible" frame of mind."

Ahearn went on to say that if that means contacting a competitor to get a piece of equipment that they don't have for a customer, that's something they are willing to do. "Consumer confidence in our ability to solve problems is part of our long term plan for success," he said.

Sometimes something as simple as the Farmer's Almanac might give your business insight into the weather trends and conditions that may be coming our way in Massachusetts. One lesson that every small business owner should learn from situations like last week is that planning ahead to take advantage of adverse situations can increase loyalty, profits and a greater sense of community in an area. That's what local small businesses should be all about.
