

Service Managers Are Now Wearing More Hats

Larry Baty focuses on the drivers when he first gets to work every morning. “I make sure they’re dispatched and have all their automatic or route deliveries set up for the day,” said Baty, operations manager for Cadenhead Servis Gas (Royse City, Texas).

“I’ll work with them on any details or questions on any specific delivery,” he added. “I line up the service personnel and make sure they have their installations or service work set up for that day. The first thing in the morning is getting everyone out on the road.”

In fact, many service managers start their day by making sure the drivers are ready to go. But that seems to be where the similarities end. Service managers use varied individual methods to keep their service departments running smoothly.

Some service managers spend a lot of time out in the field serving customers. Others spend no time at all out in the field. And technical knowledge is a big factor for some service managers when hiring new technicians, while an employee’s willingness to stay and grow with the company is a higher priority for other service managers.

Some prefer a mix. “We like to see someone with experience, although we have hired a lot of people who didn’t have a lot of experience, people who are looking for a place to set themselves down and be here for a while,” said Walt Piontek, service manager for Proctor Gas (Proctor, Vt.).

Interviews with five service managers from propane companies of various sizes show that the number of hats a service manager wears has grown over the past few years. He must be technically savvy, but people skills might be even more important. The service manager must possess human resources knowledge in supervising staff. He might serve as a bobtail delivery driver during busy times; in other instances, he might even be involved in sales.

“If I have any spare time during the day, I’m on the phone trying to solicit business,” Baty stated.

Technological advances have meant big changes in how service managers have performed their job duties over the past few years. But several service managers agree that people skills are one of the most important aspects to the position.

Technology, People Skills Mix

Technology skills and people skills became even more important for Ben McWhorter, service manager for the Fortuna, Calif. branch office of Sequoia Gas (Arcata, Calif.), when the company about a year ago implemented TouchStar hand-held computers for the delivery drivers. “I was given the reins on that project, making sure the units were up and running and the drivers were comfortable using them,” said McWhorter, who has been with the company full time for about a year and a half. He has been involved with the family business for at least 12 years.

“Any price changes or customer history, all of that information is in their hands rather than having to call the office and ask,” McWhorter pointed out.

Piontek, who has been with Proctor Gas for 21 years and in management for more than 10, agrees that technology is an important part of the service manager position.

Communication with bobtail drivers was much less advanced when he first started out.

“Before, we gave them delivery tickets and they went out for the day,” Piontek explained. “If we needed to change something, we would have to get in touch with them over the radio. Now, I can actually send them a delivery from my computer station here. I can see on the screen where they are. I can see where they delivered, how much gas, and where they are from moment to moment.”

Cadenhead Servis Gas uses FuelPak, a software system that organizes the customer information, and Baty can dispatch drivers through the system. He can conduct forecasting on what deliveries must take place and when. The drivers carry

Other Service Manager Duties

Service managers have taken on many additional duties over the years. Some examples:

Vehicle maintenance: Baty of Cadenhead Servis Gas handles the company’s vehicle maintenance. Patrick Services in Dallas periodically comes to the Cadenhead location to perform scheduled maintenance on the trucks. At the beginning of the month, Baty sends a mileage report for each vehicle to Patrick Services, which performs the service. “The smaller stuff I can follow up on and schedule someone to come out and do those repairs,” explained Baty, whose duties also include arranging for a back-up vehicle while one is being repaired.

Website management: McWhorter of Sequoia Gas helped develop his company’s website improvements that allowed customer access to their accounts. Sequoia Gas customers can now pay bills and request service online. McWhorter set up pages, templates, and photos and worked with a Web designer to update the site.

“A lot of it was just going online and looking at websites, and seeing how other companies do it,” McWhorter noted. “It was a fun project. You’re constantly looking for ways to make things easier for your customers and employees.”

Customer complaint representative: George Propane’s company policy is for service manager Scott Bisbee to speak with every customer that calls about a service-related issue. Bisbee doesn’t think that’s unusual, or at least he thinks it shouldn’t be. “I think that would have to be the norm if you’re going to be successful.”



Technology skills and people skills became important for Sequoia Gas service manager Ben McWhorter when the company implemented hand-held computers for the delivery drivers.

cards that contain information on their work for the day, and they download that information into their hand-held computers. “They don’t have to handwrite anything,” Baty explained. “At the end of the day, they bring the card into the office, and it’s downloaded straight into the computer so there are no handwritten reports.”

The Role of Technology

Technology has been an important part of Scott Bisbee’s job, as well. The service manager for George Propane (Goshen, Mass.) for nine years, Bisbee has been with the company since he started out as a youth sweeping floors 16 years ago. In the past few years, the company’s use of technology has greatly expanded, starting with a system from Rural Computer Corp. that performs functions including parts inventory and driver dispatch. Most recently, the company’s technology involvement expanded to its product line. George Propane began selling the Freewatt generation system in August. The Freewatt system, developed with



Walt Piontek, service manager for Proctor Gas, pictured with office manager Laurie Poro, believes dealing effectively with employees is an important service manager function.



Mike Beaulieu, service manager for Porco Energy, believes new technology can lead to less contact with customers, so maintaining a relationship with the customer is important.

support from the Propane Education & Research Council (PERC), uses micro-combined heat and power technology and combines a furnace and generator to make electricity and heat the home.

“We’re one of the few dealers for western Massachusetts,” Bisbee stated about his company’s involvement with the Freewatt system. Bisbee, along with his company’s general manager and lead technician, attended training sessions on the product. He acknowledges that getting builders and the general public to make the large investment in the Freewatt system has been a slow process. “It’s a fairly new market, so we’re trying to open it up. It’s fairly exclusive. There are only a couple of dealers in the state at this point.”

Specialized Training

George Propane sells the Rinnai tankless water heater, which is George Propane’s best-selling water heater. Most of the company’s technicians have gone through Rinnai training.



Scott Bisbee, service manager for George Propane, has seen expanded use of technology at his company. The business in August began selling the Freewatt generation system.

Bisbee predicted that keeping up with technology will be one of a service manager's challenges in the years to come. "One of the biggest difficulties I have is keeping the techs up to date," he pointed out. "Some of the new boilers and furnaces are getting so they're smarter than we are, especially at midnight when you're out there in the middle of winter."

And at least one service manager combines his technological and people skills by holding classes for customers. A Cadenhead customer had trouble shutting the gas off properly on a space heater, so Baty went to the customer's home and conducted a safety class there. "We're going to put a repair kit in there for them," he noted. "She also had some space heaters that needed repair."

Field Work

Time spent out in the field varies widely among service managers interviewed for this article. Piontek of Proctor Gas notes that he rarely gets out in the field, although he used to assist on installations about 15 years ago. Baty of Cadenhead Servis Gas gets out more in the spring and summer than he does the rest of the year.

"Occasionally I'm out helping the service guys if it's a big job or if there's an issue that needs to be looked at immediately," noted Baty, who has been with the company for more than 30 years. "If they're tied up, I may go out and do some type of inspection or leak test. That helps keep the cobwebs out. Of course, when it gets really busy, I've been known to get in the truck and deliver gas."

Others like Mike Beaulieu, service manager for Porco Energy (Marlboro, N.Y.), tend to spend a great deal of time out in the field. Beaulieu started as a service tech for the company and became service manager a little over a year ago. "My thing is I like talking to customers," he commented. "I enjoy hearing their input. I'm one of those types who want to make sure the customer is 100% happy with the work. If they have any questions, especially if there's a call-back issue where we've been there before and haven't corrected the problem the first time, a lot of times I like to go back either by myself or with the tech, and give the customer that comfortable feeling that the problem is going to be solved in the most efficient way possible." Beaulieu added that although service managers must keep up on their knowledge of the latest equipment technology, the new technology can lead to less contact with customers. "So we need to maintain the relationships with the customers," he noted.

Piontek believes people skills will grow in importance for service managers, and that includes dealing effectively with employees. "The quality and cooperation of the employees is important for the success of any business," he noted. "You have to keep the customers happy, but also the employees. The continuity is a big thing. A lot of our customers know

Servicing What They Sell

George Propane performs service on the furnaces and boilers it sells. In fact, Massachusetts law requires that plumbing and heating companies in the state must offer a one-year warranty on its equipment, in addition to factory warranties on the products.

Porco Energy offers a one-year warranty on parts and labor. "If we install a new heating system or do any major repairs, we stand behind our work," Beaulieu stated. "If we find that our workmanship isn't the quality that it should be, we will do what it takes to correct the problem without burdening the customer. The last thing you want to do nowadays is lose a customer over something that can be very easily fixed in a short period of time."

they're going to keep seeing the same people all the time. They can call and ask for Mike and say 'Mike did a nice job last year. Can I have him this year?' I think that's important."

Training is a big part of a service manager's duties, and among Baty's employee training programs at Cadenhead Servis Gas are monthly and quarterly safety meetings that mostly focus on one area of safety. Baty runs the meetings and often bases the meeting topic on a recent safety issue the company has confronted. A Cadenhead customer recently needed service on a rusty underground tank regulator with a hole in it. Baty at the safety meeting reviewed inspecting regulators as well as testing anodes on underground tanks.

Another safety meeting discussed a customer's underground tank relief valve that was missing a cap. "The cap somehow got lost, and [the relief valve] filled up with dust and dirt," Baty explained. "We had to go back and clean it out. It actually started rusting, so we replaced it and used that as a show and tell."

Human Resources

And of course, hiring is a major part of a service manager's staffing duties, but that role often depends on the company's location of the country. In Massachusetts, where George Propane is located, plumbers' licenses

include a gas license, and Bisbee relies quite a bit on plumbers to fill staff positions. "Getting a straight LP guy is a little harder," Bisbee noted. His company also participates in a work co-op program with Smith Vocational School in Northampton, Mass.

Beaulieu of Porco Energy, who supervises about nine service techs, emphasizes training when hiring new techs. He also looks for efficiency. "You've got to be neat and thorough," he noted. "You're not going to know everything; nobody does. But we look for somebody who is going to walk into a customer's house, represent the company well, represent the service department well, and just do a good job." —Daryl Lubinsky



Overseeing maintenance for the company's vehicles is one of many duties of Larry Baty, operations manager for Cadenhead Servis Gas.