

Leaping into Home Repair

By Scott McGrath

I had been the face of McGrath Pest Control for a handful of years before I took the reins in 2010. My dad wanted to phase himself out after spending 36 years building this successful Houston, Texas-based business, and I was excited to become increasingly involved throughout the dozen or so years I worked under his guidance. As the company's new leader, I had ideas. Big ideas. In one case, a little too big.

Shortly after I took over management, I looked at our books and thought we should be bringing in more revenue. I thought about how frequently customers had asked me if my team could do home repairs. I wanted to be able to say "yes," and the timing seemed ideal to make that happen. Based on our growth figures, I was in position to hire a new employee, plus my brother-in-law George happened to be a carpenter. We talked and decided we would get him trained in pest management and then start a new home repair division, which he would manage in addition to providing pest control services.

I wasted no time advertising on Angie's List, Yelp and a few other places, specifically touting our new home repair services. Business started pouring in. We took on big projects — replacing doors and windows, building bookshelves, you name it. Some of these projects were a stretch in terms of our scope of capabilities, but we remained confident, certain that we could provide the needed services and enthusiastic about driving new revenues.

Unfortunately, we were too busy with pest management to commit to home repairs as fully as the projects required. The carpentry jobs took much longer than we had anticipated, and we ended up trying to squeeze them in instead of giving them our undivided attention. Many customers were dissatisfied. Some refused to pay. Addressing the various



Now that the firm is taking on only those home repairs that relate directly to pest management, customers — and management — are happy with this add-on service.

issues that arose from this situation took a bite out of our revenues and our reputation. Our haste in expanding our services without appropriate planning had done exactly the opposite of what we had hoped to achieve.

HOW WE MADE IT WORK. It didn't take me long to pull the plug on our home repair services — with this exception: We now provide home repairs that relate to pest management, and particularly, rodent exclusions. George is now our rodent exclusion expert, as he is able to seal entry points much more professionally than I had ever done before. We've harnessed his construction expertise and scaled it down to a very precise function with very positive results.

As for our customers, we lost a few of the new ones — those who came to us specifically for carpentry work. But we kept our loyal pest control customers who had given our home repair services a shot. Once we talked with them about what had happened, they were understanding and continued on with us for pest management.

ONCE BITTEN, TWICE SHY? Although our first experience into expanding services gave me pause, I don't think that the lesson learned was to never expand. The lesson was to learn everything you can about the new service line before leaping into promises. Going forward, my approach will be (1) conduct market research among customers to ascertain what type of additional services they might want and whether they will entrust me, their pest management provider, to provide those services, (2) make sure that the new services tie in some way to pest management, (3) learn all I can about the services, from capital costs and training/certifications to liability issues and (4) start small, doing a few trial projects before spreading the service across our entire customer base.

With all of this in mind, our company is in the process of adding mosquito misting to our service offerings, and evaluating the potential profitability of adding bed bug heat treatments. One thing you can be sure of, though: We won't be jumping into anything too quickly! There's a lot to be said for starting out with baby steps. **PCT**

As told to Donna DeFranco.

