

# Doing It Right

## An in-depth look at the launch of the Mr. Squeaky Car Wash Franchise

**W**hen it comes to the construction of a car care facility, many operators who are just entering the industry think this is a time to relax and let the experts do their jobs. After all, what possibly can a future car care

entrepreneur help with during the construction of their facility? The answer will surprise you.

During our second article of a three-part series on Mr. Squeaky Car Wash, we will discuss the construction process and how unexpected problems can quickly derail a construction process if the operator has not completed their homework.

### Expected Or Unexpected?

One of the biggest surprises that Richard Sasso, owner of the Mr. Squeaky Car Wash Franchise, found during the construction phase of car wash start up was to expect the unexpected.

“The biggest headaches during the construction process were caused by the ‘unexpected’ problems that turned out to be problems just typical of site development,” he says. “Certain elements of construction seem to always just pop up, such as cost overruns, mistakes in the field by subcontractors, problems with city inspections, material availability and loan documentation. While none of these items single-handedly created an unmanageable headache, all of these items taken





together created a stressful environment during the development of the Mr. Squeaky flagship site.”

As with any new business venture, one of the primary concerns as a car wash developer (and business owner in general) is to ensure that cost overruns do not get out of hand. Sasso says that all potential car care operators need a good construction agreement with their general contractor, which will limit the vast majority of problems that might arise. However, he notes that there will always be “change orders” and additional costs on a construction project. Your job as owner is to make sure these “change orders” do not pile up, or your project’s budget can quickly spiral out of control.

“In order to limit the cost overruns and mistakes on the project and to keep things on track with our schedule, I personally took on a great deal of the day-to-day supervision of my project,” he says. “I dedicated myself full time to Mr. Squeaky before construction even began. My full-time job during construction was to make sure each subcontractor and the GC showed up to work each and every day. I sometimes took it upon myself to call and make sure the cement had been ordered when I knew we would be pouring the foundation the next day or to

make follow up calls to confirm the roof trusses had been ordered or to schedule the welder to return for his ‘punch list.’”

Sasso says that his GC did an average job of coordinating the project and ultimately the project would have been completed even if never showed up at the site; however, he also knows that his daily presence kept his project at the front of the GC’s mind and prevented several problems that could have been disastrous.

While Mr. Squeaky was just one of 10 or more projects for Sasso’s GC, the successful development of this flagship site was the single focus and concern in his work-life before, during and after construction.

“One small example of a construction problem I was able to nip in the bud related to the car wash trench being formed and poured, including the chase-way piping to the trench from the equipment room,” he says. “I had studied the drawings provided by Sonny’s, my engineer and architect for hundreds of hours before construction ever began. I wanted to know those drawings better than anyone else on the jobsite. I not only corrected a few errors in elevation and slope of the trench while it was being formed, I also noted that the chase-way piping had been placed in the wrong location. These errors, if not corrected before the concrete was poured the next day, would have caused a tremendous delay to the project. Several other similar errors popped up along the way that were averted due to proper preparation and attention to detail.”

Another area where Sasso warns future car care developers to be aware is with city inspection and the delays they cause.

“The site inspections by the City’s officials became burdensome,” he says. “Something very minor could delay the approval of one inspection, which would lead to the pushing back the schedule for other future inspections.”

A similar domino effect would occur from time to time with basic construction materials. Sasso says that during the construction of the Mr. Squeaky site, the demand in South Florida for building products, including concrete block and roofing materials, was in extremely high demand.

“If the GC or his subcontractors forgot to order something we would ultimately need a few weeks down the road, there would be a delay in receiving those much needed materials,” he says. “The cumulative delays due to inspections and/or material unavailability accounted for at least three weeks of lost time on my project.”

There was also a great deal of paperwork with the City throughout the construction process that Sasso says also ultimately delayed the project.

“While it took several months just to get the building permit that enabled us to break ground, any minor revision to the plans which are typical during actual construction necessitated

numerous visits to the building department and further paperwork for approval,” he says. “The documentation requested by my bank and the SBA to have a final loan closing was also significant and time consuming.”

### One Day At A Time

While many aspects were more difficult and time consuming than first believed, there also were areas where things were easier than expected.

“While I had expected at least minor problems with the equipment installation, I was very surprised at how smooth and efficient this process actually was,” he says. “There was constant communication with Sonny’s during the construction process. As the time drew closer for the equipment to be installed, there were a few site visits by Sonny’s to ensure the work was progressing smoothly on the project.

“Once Sonny’s had coordinated and completed the basic equipment installation, ICS stepped in and worked on getting the Tunnel Controller and Auto Sentries up and running,” he adds. “The ICS installer not only helped by teaching me how to run the tunnel controller, the POS and the related ICS hardware, he even answered several ques-



Aerial view during construction.

tions and directed the electricians that were wiring up the car wash equipment.”

During the entire install, Sasso was around, even lending a hand with the physical installation process.

The entire installation process took about a week and a half and after each and every piece of equipment was installed, the testing started.

“We tested dozens of vehicles after the equipment had been installed to dial things in,” he says. “I put in several late nights with the ICS installer to set up and learn the software for the tunnel management system. My representative from Blue Coral was also here during this time to set up his chemicals and ensure all was running smoothly, and with a great deal of trial and error, everything was perfected.”

Once the tunnel equipment, computer system and chemicals had been tested, calibrated, and fine tuned, Sasso had about two more weeks of final punch list work with the GC before Mr. Squeaky would have a soft opening to the public.

“From the start of the equipment install to the day the Mr. Squeaky flagship site opened for business was one of the smoothest times during the entire construction process, and I had actually expected it to be one of the worst,” he says. “There was a tremendous coordinated effort from Sonny’s, ICS, Blue Coral, the electrician, plumber and other subcontractors to pull this all together without any major delays.”

For operators who might be experiencing a build out for the first time, Sasso says that his manufacturers played a crucial role throughout construction to ensure the project would run smoothly.

“There was a preconstruction meeting attended by Sonny’s, the GC, and all key subcontractors where questions were answered and potential issues were ironed out before any site work was started,” he says. “I spoke with Sonny’s and ICS continuously throughout the entire construction process. I often made calls for assistance to both ICS and Sonny’s while standing in the field with a technical question from one of the subcontractors. There were periodic site visits by Sonny’s to ensure the project was progressing as their experience dictated it should.

“During the construction process, both ICS and Sonny’s updated their construction drawings, and I even fine-tuned my equipment package with each manufacturer,” continued Sasso. “I continued to receive the guidance I had expected from both my manufacturers. To me, this was very important as I did not want to have to reinvent the wheel. They both had helped countless other operators in the same position as me get from ground breaking to grand opening, and I relied on their knowledge to help guide the my project in the right direction.”

## Timely Hints

Sasso offers these tips to other operators in order to get them through the construction process.

- ▶ First, as with preconstruction, planning and preparation is the key to a smooth construction process on any project. The more time you dedicate to planning and preparing for construction, the better able you will be to address the issues that will undoubtedly arise. As in the example mentioned earlier, preparation in the form of truly understanding the building plans allowed us to avoid several problems during the construction process.
- ▶ Second, it takes great effort to stay on top of the construction phase and keep things moving in the right direction. There are hundreds of little battles that must be fought along the way. As the developer, you at times must push, argue and cajole to keep things moving, while at other times you need to coach and pat the key players on the back.
- ▶ Third, through proper planning and continuous effort, you will slowly acquire the knowledge base needed in order to successfully develop a new car wash site. It is imperative that you ask as many questions as possible from the many knowledgeable people you will meet. If you do not have this type of support base surrounding your project before construction even begins, you should take a step back and figure out how to surround yourself with people that can truly assist you in getting your site developed. One of the many ways I added to my knowledge base, which greatly assisted me throughout the construction process, was by working at an actual car wash site and by attending and passing all of the courses available at the car wash college.
- ▶ Fourth, be aware that you do not need to develop your car wash project alone. Guidance is available in many forms, including teaming up with knowledgeable people as noted above. Choosing the key people to assist you in making your car wash dream site a reality is one of the most important decisions you will make. I am personally dedicated to assisting all future Mr. Squeaky Car Wash franchisees to ensure their success. I look forward to the challenges and rewards that the development of franchise sites will bring, as there are many people new to the car wash industry that will see their dream site built with Mr. Squeaky’s guidance and assistance.
- ▶ Finally, the development of a car wash project from the ground up requires capital reserves. You will need money to sustain the lack of cash flow for many months during both preconstruction and construction, until you open your site to the public and have your first paying customers. Capital reserves are also necessary to address the issues that will pop up, including cost overruns, change orders, truly unexpected problems and

revisions to the building plans. Many projects do not get to see the doors open to what otherwise would be a successful car wash due to undercapitalization. Being conservative on your projections and figures will greatly assist you in avoiding a similar fate.

The entire process, from ground breaking to the final, ready-to-run car wash facility took approximately four months. Although Sasso admits to it being sometimes grueling process, he said it was easy to stay motivated and find the energy to keep up with the many tasks at hand.

“There had been so much planning before ground breaking that it was very exciting to simply get things under way,” he says. “Trying to keep an even temper while being excited to see the site construction completed was a challenge. There were many aspects of construction that were very slow. As I was out on site every day during construction, it felt like I was watching paint dry at times. The site preparation work, which included bringing in special fill and compacting the ground for both the building and the parking lot, was a very slow stage. It is important to keep your focus on the big picture, and take each

day at a time when things are moving forward slower than you would like.”

On the other hand, Sasso says there were times that the construction process seemed to fly by, making the management a bit easier.

“One example of this was the block work for the building itself. After the several weeks it took for the site to be prepared, and for both the foundation of the building and the car wash trench to be poured, the block walls for the entire project went up in about a week and a half,” he says. “As the developer, you will run into both slow times and fast progress, and as long as you stay on top of the overall progress of your project, the car wash will ultimately be completed.” **ACCB**

---

*Editor's Note: This is the second of a three-part series that will follow Sasso through the preconstruction, construction and post-construction phases of opening his car care business. Sasso is the owner/operator of Mr. Squeaky Car Wash, headquartered in Pompano Beach, Fla. For information regarding franchise opportunities please call (786) 247-7974 or visit [www.Mr-Squeaky.com](http://www.Mr-Squeaky.com).*

