

# COVID-19 Challenges and Opportunities to Business



A perspective from an international pest management company

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**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has presented society and industry with innumerable challenges of varying complexity and degree of disruption, and it almost goes without saying that the professional pest management industry has not been immune from these impacts. Despite this, the professional pest management industry has also been somewhat fortunate to be one of very few service industries that have also had some business opportunities present during this period. As we leave the year 2020 behind, it is worthwhile to look back at some of the challenges our businesses have faced since the pandemic began, and at the same time look ahead towards some of the opportunities that might present over the coming months and years.

## Challenges

It would largely be unsurprising to most that the challenges our professional pest management businesses have faced since the pandemic began can be largely grouped into four key categories, these being:

1. Ensuring our industry was recognised and classified as an essential service,
2. The logistics and complexities of continuing to operate during COVID-related lockdowns and curfews,

3. Securing our supplies of Personal Protective Equipment ('PPE') so we could safely undertake our services, and,

4. Managing the challenge of cancellations and deferrals. Within these challenges, it is nonetheless worth exploring some of the major trends or themes that have become apparent.

## *Pest Management as an Essential Service*

Fundamentally, the professional pest management industry has been in the fortunate position of being recognised and classified as an 'essential service' in jurisdictions across the Asia Pacific and China regions. This has allowed most businesses to continue operating throughout the pandemic, albeit still facing the vagaries of COVID-related lockdowns and lost work as a result of customers closing or going out of business.

What this period has taught us though is the importance of pest management associations in being the 'voice' of the industry in ensuring the value and importance of our services was considered as various Governments made the (often arbitrary) decision as to what industries were regarded as being 'essential'. In this respect the ability for professional pest management associations to take the lead with lobbying and advocacy meant that a balanced and informed

argument could be made on our behalf, thus ensuring the best outcome for the whole industry and not one segment (e.g., commercial versus residential).

The second aspect associated with the challenge of being recognised as an essential service has been simply the uncertainty created as a result of Governments typically taking several days or more to publicly endorse what industries were formally 'essential'. During this period, customers would often refuse, defer, or turn-away services, and the ability of our service teams to freely move around a city or region was impacted if lockdowns had come into effect. Fundamentally though, these delays were often short-lived, and through the collective engagement of the industry and our Associations the decision from Government was normally shared very quickly (sometimes within minutes of the announcement being published).

### *Operating During Lockdowns and Curfews*

As mentioned previously, one of the more practical challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic has been how businesses can continue to operate whilst Governments implement lockdowns and curfews in order to manage the spread of the virus. From an Australian (and Victorian perspective – the State where I live), this became most evident as Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne began to experience its 'second wave' during late June and early July. In response to rising cases across the state, two things happened: firstly, other States and Territories all restricted or prohibited travel across the border, with this cascading into a generalised border lockdown across virtually the entire Nation, and secondly, the Victorian Government also implemented a 'ring of steel' travel restriction enforced by roadblocks between metropolitan Melbourne and regional areas.

In the first instance, these restrictions meant that technicians that had to cross state borders (for example those living and working on the Queensland and New South Wales border, or the Victoria and New South Wales border) suddenly could no longer access and service their normal route and customers on the other side of the border. In some instances, these restrictions were only temporary, as Governments gradually began to implement permits for those living and working in the cross-border zone, but in some cases it has

meant longer-term rearrangement of routes and support from different areas of a State for many of those customers to continue receiving their service(s). In the second scenario, restrictions on travel between regional and metropolitan areas also meant permits had to be obtained, and services pre-booked well in advance for the customer to be prepared to receive the technician. Night-time curfews further complicated the logistics of meeting our service commitments, and sometimes required an additional and separate permit for work to go unhindered.

Fundamentally, though, what all these border and regional restrictions and curfews had in common was the complexity of doing business (with the requirement one or more permits) and the delays caused by waiting in queues to pass through various checkpoints. In many instances, Governments were slow to implement permit systems, their application process was often overwhelmed upon launch, and the conditions required to obtain a permit regularly changed depending on the severity of the virus outbreak. And in severe instances, technicians were caught for several hours in queues of traffic waiting to pass through a checkpoint. When cumulatively considered over a normal day, week, or month, a significant amount of time was lost in simply travelling a normal route, with this in turn placing enormous pressure on meeting all the contracted service visits for a month. Fortunately, Governments have largely improved their permit processes, and enhanced their methods of roadside checks, and for at least the last few months it has been easier to operate. However, with the vagaries of the current pandemic, it cannot be assumed that such restrictions will not become an issue again.

Finally, another factor often overlooked with these lockdowns and border restrictions has been the difficulty of supporting customers with Sales and Technical opportunities or issues. These team members have been similarly impacted, and if a customer is experiencing a pest issue requiring technical support, ensuring the appropriate team member is available has been more complex than normal. As expected, virtual meetings have become the norm, but the value of having direct eyes on the ground or expertise in the room is an aspect of our industry that should not be underestimated.

### ***Provision of Personal Protective Equipment***

The challenges to the provision of Personal Protective Equipment ('PPE') has undeniably been an issue that I believe all countries and companies have been acutely aware of, particularly during the earlier phase of the pandemic in March, April and May. Again, it is perhaps not unsurprising that items of PPE such as face masks, face shields, and disposable gloves suddenly experienced unprecedented demand and ensuring these essential items continued to be available for our field service technicians was a significant challenge for a brief period. In many respects, the issue of supply barely needs to be discussed in this article.

However, two other aspects associated with this issue are also worth nothing, with these being the proliferation of inferior quality alternatives and customers setting unnecessarily strict requirements for accessing their site(s).

In the first instance, from an Australian perspective, as supply became constrained poor-quality versions of the equipment we would normally use began to appear on the market. This complicated supply as, when dealing with insecticides and pesticides, the highest standard of protection is required and must be expected. In my own experience I was, at one point in early in the pandemic, supplied with a sample of masks that upon a quick search of the internet had been tested by the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and found to provide as little as 16% filtering efficacy. Thankfully, such inferior stock has been targeted by our regulatory bodies and is now the exception to the rule, but it should still be considered by those in the field and called out if inferior options have been supplied.

Finally, one aspect that was perhaps as frustrating for our field service teams than the supply of PPE itself was with customers setting unnecessary standards as a requirement for access to the site. In one such instance our technicians were required to wear a respirator – at all times – even when conducting low-risk tasks such as cockroach gel baiting and rodent baiting. This had two negative consequences, with limited stocks of respirator cartridges being wasted, and it effectively doing nothing for the prevention of the spread of COVID-19. Instead, a better site access requirement would simply have been for all people on site, including both employees and contractors, to

be required to wear a disposable face mask. Thankfully, we have generally seen such responses from customers being moderated, although some very sensitive sites (such as aged care facilities) still have strict – albeit warranted – site access requirements that might include rigorous PPE use.

### ***Cancellations and Deferrals***

One final aspect to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic is another that perhaps largely requires little mention or analysis – that being customer-initiated cancellations and deferrals. All businesses will have being impacted to some extent this year, with the degree of that impact largely subject to the vagaries of which market segments our businesses specialise in. Even those with a largely diversified base can be impacted if that diversified base is unevenly affected (e.g. imagine a business that does residential, hotels, and full-service restaurants).

As we would all understand, the pandemic has been (quite frankly) brutal in its impact across a wide variety of industries, but with the hardest hit being those involved in hospitality (e.g. restaurants) and lodging (hotels). Even the best analysis suggests that these segments will take many years to recover and are intricately linked to the recovery in tourism, business travel, discretionary spending, consumer sentiment, and the business districts of cities being reoccupied. With the world in recession, and possibly depression, the survival of businesses in these industries will rely largely on how well their respective Government manages the pandemic (with it unsurprisingly being those countries that have mishandled the pandemic experiencing the hardest economic hit).

And so it is at this time that perhaps the best thing we can do as an industry is to understand how best we can support our customers during this period. In many instances, zealously enforcing contracted service frequencies and pest coverage is largely ineffective and undoubtedly degrades good-will with the customer. Instead, a risk-based approach should again be the foundation of our relationship with the customer and we should be at-the-ready with information that is timely, relevant, and targeted in helping them understand the importance of pest management as they navigate in- and out- of (and potentially 'in-again')

pandemic-related shutdowns. Do they need their cockroach treatment every month while in limited operation or even shut down? Have they had any fly issues if they've been closed for 2 months? Do they need someone to flush the drains (more on this later)? These are hard topics for a business to contemplate, but if it helps a customer remain in business then the long-term benefit should be considered. They may, in turn, lead to other business opportunities.

### Opportunities

Whilst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have deservedly received most of the attention, it is worth considering that the pandemic, and business responses to it, will undoubtedly also create opportunities. Ultimately, some of these opportunities will be more apparent than others, and may not be applicable to all segments that professional pest management covers. As with the challenges, I would break them down into three main themes, these being: 1. Services for business entering or in shutdown or limited operation, 2. Sanitising or disinfection services, and 3. Services for businesses that are re-opening or that have experienced a pest infestation whilst closed.

#### Shutdown Services

As noted earlier in this document, one of our challenges as a pest management provider during this period is to how we can best respond to our customers' needs during this period - and whilst in might sound illogical, supporting our customers as they prepare to go into shutdown or a period of limited operation is a prime time for this and an area Ecolab had some success as the world experienced the first pandemic wave.

This mostly affects the hospitality and restaurant segment, but it would be fair to say that as these businesses have prepared for shutdown (often only with a few days' notice) pest management is rarely on their list of things to do. However, the 'right service' at the 'right time' can provide long-lasting protection for a facility and potentially prevent a pest infestation that might develop whilst the business is unattended. In many respects, the need for the service comes down to timing, and getting information to the customer that is highly relevant to them in a time-efficient and targeted manner. There is often only a very short window

of opportunity, and thus the flexibility of the professional pest management business to cater to the customer's needs is also critical. And to rely on an old maxim – whether it's a rapid service, or bringing forward their normally contracted service, or simply doubling up some rodent bait and cockroach gel – something is better than nothing. A good Marketing function within the business is highly valuable for these types of activities as they can understand the market trends and quickly leverage the right technical content so that the customer knows that they have options available to them.

The other aspect to be considered is whether the customer can accommodate some services during their period of shutdown or limited operation. Again, this will vary significantly between market segments, and even customer to customer, but the ability to offer some form of pest management protection during this period is invaluable. As noted above, the challenge rests with the professional pest management business to offer services that provide the maximum value to the customer during this time, and to adhere to the customer's site access requirements no matter how strict. Tasks that might seem peripheral to our normal service offering, like flushing drains or checking bins have been emptied, might make the difference between a booked service and a deferred service, particularly if combined with favourable payment terms or other incentives to confirm the service.

#### Sanitising / Disinfection Services

Another area that has received significant attention during the pandemic has been sanitising or disinfection services (*note: sanitising and disinfection can have different meanings or claims in various parts of the world; hence both are used in this article*). Many companies, including Ecolab, have offered in these services in some countries primarily in response to massively heightened customer demand and professional pest managers being perceived as well-equipped to apply sanitisers and disinfectants. Naturally, interest in this service peaked during the first wave from March and some professional pest management business will have seen these services as an opportunity to offset losses from cancellation and service deferrals. In that respect, this was a

good business opportunity to pursue, and was an obvious opportunity to again engage with our customers on a 'value-adding' service that we could provide during an extremely disrupted time. As a result, some countries and regions have had good success in offering this service, either through a regular service option or (more often) offering it as an option for businesses that are re-opening from a period of shutdown or limited operation.

However, whilst I fully support a business's choice to offer these services, caution had to be given at the time as to reason why people were requesting such services and whether, in reality, they were likely to have any positive effect. Fundamentally, it was disappointing to see that many instances within the industry could be found where such a precautionary approach was not heeded, a fact which does not reflect on us well. The assumption that professional pest managers are the most appropriately skilled at conducting these services needs to be challenged, along with our industry's knowledge of how to prepare for and act within a potentially highly infectious environment. Compounding this were some, at the time, ambiguous claims being made as to efficacy against the SARS-CoV-2 virus at a time when no product had been tested against the virus, and some dubious application methods (such as ULV misting and thermal fogging) being chosen for products never intended to be applied as such.

Of course, the reason for these concerns was that society was in many instances behaving irrationally and likely devolving to a base approach of dousing everything with sanitiser or disinfectant would solve the virus challenge. This is perhaps best exemplified through the proliferation of sanitiser / disinfection tunnels in shopping malls and airports, and large-scale parades of sanitiser and disinfectant application from roving government workforces. Did any of these have any impact on the spread of the virus – well, probably not.<sup>1</sup>

Fundamentally, I would argue that our industry would have been better served taking an educative role and deferring the public health experts on what an appropriate sanitising or disinfection service consisted of. In a similar vein, the professional pest management Associations should have taken a far more proactive approach to this practice and been similarly aggressive in defining 'Best Practice' with input from our public

health departments. To a degree, some of that advice came too-little, too-late.

As to the future of disinfection treatments? I suspect they are here to stay, but at a significantly reduced level of demand. Many customers, particularly those in the hospitality and lodging segments, have likely sought their own expert advice and now understand that 'COVID-safe' treatments can be done with many of the cleaning chemicals that had on-hand already. Nonetheless, some countries and regions will likely see some sales well into 2021, and possibly beyond, depending on both customer demand following shutdowns or the country's general handling of the pandemic as a whole.

### ***Re-opening Services / Increased Pest Activity***

A final opportunity that perhaps wasn't grasped as fully as it could have been are services and treatments for businesses that are re-opening from a shutdown.

Initially, some of the expectation for these types of services was based on an assumption that these businesses would be experiencing significant pest activity – but the evidence to date would suggest that such claims to be largely overblown. Instead, these services should instead have been about returning a premise to a 'safe-food' standard. For those companies involved, it could be combined with a sanitising / disinfection treatment, but care had to be taken again such that the positive effects of an insecticide treatment were not negated by a disinfectant or sanitiser treatment, thus a planned timeline had to be agreed to by the customer. Similarly, if the business is re-opening but facing capacity and operational limits, then the same flexibility and responsiveness is warranted as with the time when the business was at the commencement of a shutdown. As stated previously – something is better than nothing.

Of course, one of the initial reasons for being interested in offering these services is because of a pervading view during the first and second waves of the pandemic that pest activity would explode. Many articles could be found, usually in reference to rodents, espousing the fact that their populations would thrive during the pandemic<sup>2</sup>, that they were invading the streets, and that they would imminently spread to the suburbs<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps unfortunately for our industry, very little

of the this eventuated (an opportunity lost?) – at least not within much of the Asia Pacific region. Not unsurprisingly, as an industry we should have perhaps looked for the less popular opinion offered by a few – Dr Bobby Corrigan being one of note – who correctly deduced that what we were seeing with rodents was not a surge in their population, but rather pre-existing infestations that were hungry, stressed, and therefore foraging more publicly for suddenly limited resources<sup>4</sup>. In many respects, they should have been easier infestations to eliminate and which instead reinforced the importance of the timely, targeted and relevant information that was provided to our customers earlier in the pandemic, particularly around what to look for that might have indicated a pest issue.

Of course, there are exceptions, but again it is probably one that most businesses missed. Based on a survey within our business, the number one issue faced by customers re-opening from a period of shutdown or limited services? American cockroaches. And the primary reason for this – no one flushed the drains. Over several weeks or months, these dried out, and enabled easy access from the sewers below. Thus, from my perspective,

when the next pandemic (or COVID-19 wave) comes, put down the sanitiser and instead pick up a bucket of warm, soapy water. Your customers will thank you for it. ■

*This article is a summary of Dr David Lilly's presentation given at the FAOPMA-Pest Summit 2020 Virtual Conference.*

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