



# Preventive Maintenance ISN'T a Commodity

by John Owens

In the early days of preventive maintenance (PM), contractors built programs based on the knowledge of what services were most necessary to ensure the best and most reliable operation of the equipment. All the services required to ensure reliable operation were included in the contract. The basics — filter and fan belt changing, for example — were always included. On larger reciprocating chillers, oil analysis, oil changes, and replacement of dryer cores were also included.

Yes, in those days, operating logs were created to record multiple operating temperatures, pressures, and other conditions of a customer's equipment. These logs not only assured customers of a thorough inspection, but also were a written record of the system operation, providing a great tool for checking on proper and efficient operation.

Was that enough? Not by a long shot. PM also included a number of operating inspections during the season. In the summer, we'd inspect the equipment at least twice, and some times three times, depending on size and application. In the winter, we performed from one to three operating inspections.

The thinking was that the additional cost could be greatly offset by finding and uncovering a potential problem before it led to complete failure and downtime. At the Owens Companies, we've often said the more spent on preventive maintenance, the more we can save a building owner in emergency service and repair costs. Plus, the energy savings potential for fine-tuning a boiler, for example, far outweighed the cost of another inspection and adjustment.

Numerous studies have shown that a comprehensive and effective PM program not only reduces emergency ser-

vice calls, repairs, and costs, but also helps reduce energy costs. In spite of this, today I see the trend moving toward reducing the cost of PM programs.

Granted, such reductions often are at the request of building owners to cut their costs. But I find the contracting community too willing to play the low bid game. The thinking, wrong as it may be, is that it's easier to drop price than to sell the value of doing the right job. Unfortunately, the owners often don't realize the gravity of such decisions.

Several years ago, we lost a contract we had for over 20 years. Another contractor came in with a half price program providing the proverbial "same services."

A follow up with this customer recently indicated that after 20 years of reliable equipment operation, one year after we lost the contract the owner had to replace several heat exchangers in his rooftop equipment. Though it can't be proven, any contractor worth his salt knows that an improperly adjusted burner can result in a failed heat exchanger in just one season.

This same owner had a large repair due to the condenser fan motor bracket flying apart. Again, nothing can be proved, but the simple act of tightening down brackets (which might take a little more time), might have prevented such a costly failure.

So this owner saved a few thousand dollars on the PM program, but spent in excess of \$30,000 in repairs. One can only wonder what their energy costs were during this same period.

## Commoditizing PM

It's been some time since competition and the customer push for lower priced maintenance programs resulted in fewer inspections. The multiple in-sea-

son inspections are long gone. Now, even one in-season inspection can be difficult to sell. And to make matters worse, the amount of time and the services provided are being squeezed even further. This used to be called flashlight maintenance. Now to my dismay, it may be becoming typical maintenance.

PM costs and hours are being cut so much that it's almost not worth doing. I used to tell owners when they were intent on taking a low priced contract that they'd be better off saving the money for the repairs that would inevitably be required.

The truth is, everyone obsessed with the cost of PM contracts is forgetting that repairs and energy costs are higher with an ineffective maintenance program.

Now consider the cost of employer productivity. Many studies show the cost of lost employee productivity due to an uncomfortable building environment makes any potential savings of a cheap preventive maintenance program totally inconsequential.

So what is the answer? Unfortunately it appears that contractors must offer some cheap "flashlight" maintenance programs just to be in the game. However, it's incumbent upon the HVACR contractor to educate building owners about the importance and benefit of a comprehensive maintenance program. It is truly the most economical way to operate a building today.



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