



Does Region Matter?

Understanding the differences in car wash types

by Carl Nuss

When considering building a car wash, how do you decide which type of a car wash to build? Not all car washes are the same. In fact, about the only thing they all have in common is water. This concept is not only important to the individuals considering becoming car wash owners, but it is also important to lending institutions who will be investing their depositors' money into such projects.

I have had numerous discussions with many players in this industry who tend to think all car wash projects are very similar in nature. This is also true of governing agencies, architectural designers, construction contractors, etc. They always say, "Oh I have done a car wash before, I know what you want." The truth of the matter is that they may know very little about the project they are about to lend money on, design or build. As a potential car wash owner, it will benefit you greatly to understand the differences in car washes so that your production "team" can create the right package for you.

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Regional Factors

It is very important that the prospective car wash owner understand what each type of car wash has to offer. He or she needs to know not only what this new investment is going to demand in terms of time and money, but if the type of car wash they are considering is best suited to the economic environment and climate in which they will be operating.

Before describing the different washes and what climates they are best suited for, it should be realized that any type of car wash can be made to work in any region of the country and you will always find all types in all regions. Certain types may be more prevalent in a given region because of climate conditions, types of soils and what has been promoted in the past. For instance, tunnel washes are more prevalent in areas similar to California, while in-bay rollovers and self-service wand bays are more likely found in the Rocky Mountain Region.

Do Your Homework

Keep in mind that it is always easier to improve on what has been accepted previously rather than blaze a new trail. However, if the climate in your area truly lends itself to a type of car wash that has not been thoroughly introduced, blazing that trail might be the best decision you make. Customers will always notice how well their car has been cleaned, and if you clean it best, they will return regardless of your equipment type.

So how do you decide if you should stick with what is already accepted or try to introduce something new? You must do your homework. Make sure to research information from sources that are not biased. Banks and lending partners can be a wealth of objective information, the larger their car wash portfolio, the better. They can tell you what has been most financially successful, independent of any motive to sell you on that product. They will know reputable equipment vendors and construction companies. Be skeptical of banks and lenders that tend to lump all types of car washes together. As you'll read in this article, all car washes are not the same.

Equipment

Of course, you must approach equipment vendors who are in your market area, because they are your most accessible source of information. They may have valuable and accurate information to share with you, but they could be pointing you in a particular direction with their benefit in mind, so go slow and thoroughly review the bill-of-goods they are trying to promote. Vendor distributorships are mainly rewarded financially for simply selling more and more equipment, sometimes without a scientific study of the market needs. The distributor is blinded by the financial rewards and ends up trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. If a vendor references successes that they have had with their equipment in other geographical areas that are different than the one you are in, take their information with a grain of salt. Keep in mind that the vendor may not be at fault in this situation, as the manufacturer may have convinced the distributor that their equipment will work anywhere in the country just so that they can sell more equipment.

Objective Advice

One other dynamic to be aware of is the “marriage” between a distributor and a particular manufacturer of equipment. When this type of relationship is present, the distributor has lost all ability to be objective in that market because he is allowed to promote only one type of equipment under contract by the manufacturer. When doing research as to what type of wash will work best in your area, seek out an independent distributor who can speak more freely on several types of equipment. They should have a history of changing with the times, which you can determine by asking what types of washes they used to sell and how they came to promote the equipment types they now sell. They should be flexible with what products they currently sell based on market forces, climate changes and new developments in the industry. The ideal source of information will come from a distributor who has navigated through all of the manufacturers to select the best equipment. If you choose to actually sign on with such a distributor, make sure that they have a solid installation team and broad knowledge base in training and service. Remember, if they only sell one brand of equipment, listen to their major selling points, but be sure to seek out other vendors in your market as well.

Know Your Competition

If you find that your potential market is already brimming with car wash types that “fit” your region, that doesn't mean you can't build another car wash of that type. Look carefully at the age of existing car washes and how well they are run. Your task may be to build a more upscale and modern facility that will run better than your competitors' washes. If you have a cleaner, better lit, more state-of-the-art property and you add to

it better operation, you will be successful. Regardless of car wash type, it goes without saying that in order to “win” your market, you should keep your bays clean, make sure all equipment is checked daily, don’t let the customer find all of your problems before you do, be friendly, greet customers with a helpful hand, market your location, etc.

Variety of Challenges

Before you start in on all of this research, you’ll want to have an understanding that different regions of the country pose a variety of cleaning challenges. This way, you can enter meetings with lenders and distributors armed with some knowledge. Soils, climate conditions, labor availability and just plain customer preference all play a part when selecting the type of a car wash to build. In the remainder of this article, I will try to break down the industry into basic “types” of car washes and then elaborate on their differences and performance levels.

- a) Full-service tunnels
- b) Express exterior tunnels
- c) In-bay rollovers
- d) Self-service wand

Full-Service Tunnels

In general, tunnels require more labor to run, which may translate into more time managing your wash. Their selling point is that you can line up car after car a few feet apart and move them through the tunnel very quickly. The difficulty is that “touchless” tunnel equipment has to try to clean from several feet away. The touchless spray arches cannot move in close enough to the front and rear of each car to deliver maximum impact, so you are left with using “zero-degree” nozzles that shoot water from several feet away to try to develop impact. With this system, seamless coverage becomes very difficult. Even with “friction” tunnel systems, the opportunity to move across the front and rear of each car is limited. If you have heavily soiled vehicles, this will lead to the necessity of pre-washing or hand cleaning to get the desired result, and manual labor dramatically increases overhead as well as increases customer expectations. Full-service tunnels require a substantial labor force, which will require substantial time on your part and may be the biggest drawback to this type. It is not unusual for this type of car wash to have 20 or 30 people or even more in order to have adequate staff available seven days a week. But if your goal is to offer a high volume of washes and your climate produces more cars with only a light dust or film on the vehicle, this type of wash may be your best choice. With a full-service tunnel, you are not just wading into the car wash industry; you are diving in head first.

Express Exterior Tunnels

Exterior express tunnels are abbreviated versions of full service tunnels. Inside cleaning equipment such as vacuums are made available but are used by the customers themselves. This

type of car wash offers high volume capability with minimal employees, usually four or five. In areas with minimal cleaning requirements, this could be a good choice.

In-Bay Rollovers

In-bay rollovers are a third type of car wash that can be found without looking too far. These types of car washes require the vehicle to be stationary inside the bay while the machine “rolls over” the vehicle. These wash types tend to be less labor intensive. A single attendant can handle several in-bay rollovers with associated wand bays. He can also handle customer issues and maintain the appearance of the property at the same time. General maintenance is very important. In-bay rollovers are open 24/7 for the most part; some areas have late night restrictions to using noisy equipment. Potential owners who would like to have the option of operating their business remotely tend to choose this type of wash because machines, of course, don’t call in sick or ask for raises. Depending on the features that you choose for your rollover wash, you can even enjoy revenue 24/7 since they work with or without you there to operate the equipment. Finally, in-bay rollover breakdowns take only one bay at a time out of service, whereas a tunnel equipment breakdown could interrupt your entire operation.

You can choose to build either a “friction” rollover or a “touchless” rollover. Again, your decision should rest heavily on your climate and the generally accepted car wash types in that area. If you are in an area where a dirty car is a car with a film or a light dust on the body, friction may be a better choice. Films and dust are easy to remove with friction and friction machines are usually less expensive to buy and operate. However, if you are faced with heavy dust, chemical from road applications, or caked on dirt, friction may do more harm than good to the surface of the vehicle. In these cases, non-friction “pressure” washing, otherwise known as “touchless,” is the best choice for removing the soil covering the vehicle.

Some manufacturers have created a “hybrid” roll-over automatic, which incorporates the very effective pressure washing up front, then follows with brushes or cloth once the heavy soil is removed. Although this type of wash seems to fit the “please everybody” mentality, they are normally more expensive than choosing to build one or the other. This is not to mention that the “hybrid” machine tries, in my opinion, to do too many things and is not as good in any one particular area. If you find yourself in a climate with moderately heavy soils on the vehicles, a good touchless wash should be able to effectively clean the car without having to use friction at all. I would recommend choosing one or the other, but not both as the “hybrid” attempts to do.

Self-Service Wand

The last type of car wash is the self-service wand bay car wash. This type is usually the least expensive to build.

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They also have the lowest throughput capacity, about four or five customers per hour per bay. In some regions they have been very successful for many years and will continue to remain popular for those who want “hands on” washing. The impression of most people is that if you wash the car yourself in a wand bay you not only save money, but you can give your car personal attention and attain any level of cleaning you desire. The drawback is you have to “work”, you get “wet” and sometimes it is “cold.” As tunnels and in-bay machines improve on cleaning effectiveness they will become the car wash types of choice, but I would not yet ignore the effectiveness of a wand bay in those areas where they have been prevalent in the past. They are cheaper, simpler and require little labor to maintain. Bay cleaning, of course, must be done for all types.

Combination Wash

A “combination” car wash, which combines the in-bay automatics with the self-service wand bays, is also a very effective choice. You have the automated option, which allows people to stay in their car as well as the do-it-yourself bays for those more frugal customers who like to custom wash their car. Both types offer 24/7 conveniences with little labor requirements. This is my personal best choice, adding as many in-bays or wand bays as the particular area can support.

Conclusion

In summary, tunnel washes can move cars through more quickly but require more labor, which will require more of your

time as an owner. Rollovers, especially multiple rollovers, may be more expensive, but generally require less labor. Customers also tend to be more forgiving and tolerant of machine error than they are of human error, which translates into fewer complaints for you to handle than you would have with a hired labor force involved. Wand bays are the least expensive to build, but have the lowest throughput per bay.

Some owners may feel strongly that they need to be present during all business hours so as to give the customer more personal attention and to manage their labor force first hand. A tunnel wash may not intrude on your lifestyle if you are of this opinion. Others want to manage their car wash from a distance and still maintain a satisfied customer base, which is why many people choose to build the in-bay rollover automatic machines. Both points of view are valid, but you must decide which will work better in your market and for you personally.

So do your research by visiting the car washes already in your region. Talk to reliable and objective lenders and distributorships that are in your area. Decide if you want to beat out your competition with the same equipment by simply doing it better, or with different equipment that hasn't been thoroughly introduced into your market. Throughout this process, remember that the type of car wash you choose to build does matter; they are not the same. This decision may be the most crucial decision you will have to make in your process of entering the car wash industry. Good luck, I hope this helps you “clean up” in the car wash business. **ACCB**



Carl Nuss the CEO and chairman of Comtec Wash Systems, Inc., founded the family-owned company in 1984. After his 24 years experience as an owner/operator, his goal remains to guide prospective car wash owners through the process of purchasing property, hiring an architect, finding financing, hiring a general contractor and providing the most up-to-date reliable car wash equipment on the market. Please contact Carl at 303.233.7667, salesinfo@comtecwash.com or visit www.comtecwash.com.