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NO BUSINESS LIKE SNOW BUSINESS

Story by JADE MCDOWELL ♦ Photos by E.J. HARRIS ♦ East Oregonian

Cold weather a boon for businesses who fix up, clean up messes — even if they feel bad for their desperate customers

Canceled appointments and below-average customer counts have piled up with the snow for many Eastern Oregon businesses this winter. But for a few industries the unusually severe winter has served as a windfall.

"We have gotten at least, if not near, double the service calls we got last year during this time," said Johnny Pollick, owner of Elite Heating & Air in Hermiston.

The consistency of the cold "really does take a toll on the HVAC systems," he said, resulting in busy, busy days for his technicians. Lately they've been staying out on the job until 9 or 10 p.m. trying to keep as few people as possible from having to spend more nights than they have to in a cold house.

The increase in service calls — and their urgency, as people worry about pipes freezing — has brought in more business, but Pollick said it has also increased payroll costs by 30 to 40 percent. It also makes life difficult on the technicians as they try to navigate a service van through the snow or fix an outdoor component in sub-zero temperatures.

"It takes a toll on the technicians themselves, trying to stay warm and still be able to work on the system," Pollick said. "A lot of times they can't wear gloves to do what they need to."

When pipes do freeze, it brings extra business for O So Kleen, which repairs and cleans up water and fire damage. Owner Dave Smith said they usually get two to three calls a week, but toward the end of December they got 17 water calls in a week, and have gotten 20 in the last 10 days.

"We've been working 10- to 12-hour days," he said. "... the severity of these has been way bigger, too."

Fire suppression systems in many area businesses, as far away as Wheeler County and as large as ConAgra, have burst and flooded entire floors of buildings, which takes longer than the typical "dishwasher broke and flooded the kitchen."

Smith said the day before he had gone out to a home in Pendleton that had six inches of water throughout the entire basement that had been sitting for days after a pipe broke while the owner was out of town. He said even though it's a business, he and his staff really do care about and feel sorry for the people whose homes they help pump out and try to salvage sentimental items.

"We get hugs, we get tears of joy," he said. "It's pretty amazing but it's a fulfilling job."

The snow and ice have also brought extra business for auto body shops. Every time someone hits a patch of ice wrong and slides into a parked car, that's two more customers for the industry.

Jesus Jimenez of Custom Collision and Auto Body in Hermiston said the shop is booked almost three weeks out, and he's heard some of the larger shops in town have even longer wait times.

"It's been a pretty natural thing right now, with the snow and ice," he said.

Most of it has been people who were rear-ended or hit the back of another vehicle themselves, but Jimenez said they had some cars and trucks that slid completely off the road.

He said they had one customer bring in a brand new car, only two months old, that was totaled after the driver swerved to miss a truck that pulled out in front of them and ended up hitting two poles and sliding off the road instead. Sometimes, he said, it is better to hit something at a low speed than jerk the wheel on ice.

"Go slow in this weather," he said. "The worst thing you can do is be in a hurry ... keep your eyes on the road



TOP: Benito Ledesma works on the bumper of a vehicle Tuesday while working at Collision & Custom Auto Body in Hermiston.

CENTER: Elite Heating and Air owner Johnny Pollick works on the heating unit for Ixtapa Mexican restaurant on Tuesday in Hermiston.

BOTTOM LEFT: Smitty's Ace Hardware cannot hold on to items like ice melt and snow shovels. Small shaker jugs are all the ice melt left on the shelves after putting a large shipment out Tuesday morning.



BOTTOM RIGHT: Eduardo Rodriguez paints the bed of a truck on Tuesday at Collision & Custom Auto Body in Hermiston.

and anticipate the traffic and that the roads are going to be slick."

Gerald Enders, owner of Fenders by Enders, said his shop doesn't do much body work, but they have still seen an increase in business from people whose vehicles have not held up well in the cold weather.

"We have been pretty busy," he said. "We've had a lot of different starters, alternators, batteries, people not having enough antifreeze in their cars. Those are the real big hitters."

He said they're still able to get to cars in the next day or two, but it might be a few days longer before their owners get them back because parts are taking longer than usual to arrive.

At Smitty's ACE Hardware, owner Tammy Smith said there has been a high demand for snow shovels, ice melt, sleds, insulation tape for pipes and other items that have been sold out everywhere in town for days at a time. After more than a month of snow, there are still a lot of people in need of a snow shovel.

"We just got a shipment and I think we only have 10 left," she said on Tuesday.

One person bought 15. "I don't know if he was reselling them, or giving them to his neighbors, or what," she said.

Unlike some of the big-box stores, ACE Hardware gets in new stock twice a week, on Mondays

and Thursdays, which helps keep up with the demand. The store has been posting on Facebook when they get a new shipment of hot ticket items, which has been driving more traffic their way.

In anticipation of the "big melt" coming up, Smith said they were stocking extra pumps and sandbags, too. People had already snapped up 10,000 pounds of ice melt over a couple of days.

"We're always trying to predict what will be needed, and how much, based on the weather," she said.

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