

The slow season playbook

Five things worth doing when the phone goes quiet, and one thing not to.

A quiet season isn't a surprise. It's the one part of the year you can see coming, and the one most people do nothing about until they're in it.

Around here the calls start thinning out somewhere in November and don't properly come back until the ground does. That happens to everyone who works outdoors. What separates one business from the next isn't whether the quiet arrives. It's what got done while it was here.

Most people do one of two things. They wait and watch the bank balance. Or they panic and cut prices, which costs more than the quiet ever did.

There's a third option, which is that these are the only months of the year you get to work on the business instead of in it. Everything below is free. Most of it is impossible in July.

If your trade doesn't slow down in winter, it slows down somewhere. Read this for whenever yours falls.

PART ONE — FILLING THE CALENDAR

01 Reactivate before you advertise

The phone goes quiet, so you go looking for new customers. New customers are the most expensive kind there is, and you go looking for them at the exact point in the year you can least afford it.

What's sitting there instead. Everyone you've worked for in the last two years already knows you, already trusts you, and already knows how to reach you. Most of them haven't heard a word from you since the invoice.

Why it doesn't happen. Getting back in touch feels like asking for work. It isn't, as long as you have something to say that's about them.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Make the list. Every customer from the last two years, out of your invoices or your phone. A sheet of paper is enough; you do not need software for this.
- Send something that isn't an advert. *"Heading into winter, if you want me to take a look at that before the cold sets in I've got time this month"* is a message. *"Book now"* is an advert, and it reads like one.

- Go in order of who you'd most like to work for again. The quiet season is the one time of year you get to choose.
- While you're talking to the happy ones, ask for a review. Two minutes of their time, and it works on your behalf all year.

A past customer who says no still remembers you exist. A stranger who scrolls past an ad doesn't.

02 Sell spring in January

Almost everybody waits for the season to start before they sell the season's work.

Everybody calls the same trades in the same week of April. If your calendar is empty on the first warm Saturday, you're competing with every other outfit for the same rushed customers, on their timetable rather than yours.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Offer the work now, at this year's price, to be done in spring. People book what's certain, and certainty is worth more to them in January than in April.
- Take a deposit. It fixes your January cash flow and it makes the booking real, because people turn up for what they've already paid for.
- Put the date in writing, even if it's a rough week rather than a day. A spring booking you both half remember isn't a booking.
- Start with the list from the section above. You've already written it.

The work happens in April either way. The only question is whether it was booked in January or fought over on the first warm Saturday.

03 Find the work that doesn't stop

Most trades think of themselves as one thing, and so never sell the half of their work that carries on in the cold.

A landscaper is also somebody with a truck and a plow. A detailer with a garage can do interiors in February. Almost anything done outdoors has an indoor version of the same skill, and almost any one-off job has a version somebody would pay to have checked every year.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Write down everything you can physically do, not everything you currently advertise. The first list is always longer.
- Pick the one that works in the cold and tell your existing customers about it. That's the whole campaign.

- Turn one one-off into something repeating. Whatever you do once well, somebody will pay to have looked at annually.
- Say the season out loud, on your website and your Google listing. *"Winter: interiors and repairs"* tells people you're open. Without it they assume you're not, and they don't call to check.

You don't need a different business in winter. You need to sell the part of this one that still works.

PART TWO — USING THE TIME

04 Do the jobs you never have time for

Every business has a list of things that would help and never get done, because not one of them is ever urgent. The quiet months are the only stretch of the year they're possible, and they're the first thing that gets skipped, because they don't feel like work.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Photograph your past work properly, while the jobs are recent enough that you can still go back and shoot them.
- Fix your Google listing: hours, categories, the area you cover, photos, and a reply to every review you've been sent. It's free, and for a lot of trades it decides who gets called before anybody opens a website.
- Write the quote template you rebuild from scratch every single time.
- Open your own website on your own phone and read it as though you'd never met you. Try to call yourself from it.
- Chase the invoices you let slide when you were busy. They don't get easier to ask about.

None of this is filler. Every one of them pays out in the busy season, which is exactly when you won't have a spare hour to do it.

05 Know what a lean month costs

A quiet season is survivable when it's been planned for and a crisis when it hasn't. Most people know it's coming every year and still couldn't say what it costs them.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Add up what the business costs in a month with no work at all: insurance, the vehicle, fuel, phone, software, rent, any loan payments. That total is your floor.
- Multiply it by the number of lean months you actually get, not the number you'd like. That's what the busy season has to cover before it pays you anything.
- Compare it to what you actually put aside last year. The gap is usually real, and usually smaller than the fear of it.

- Decide the number now, in a calm month, rather than working it out in February when it's already a problem.

Money set aside in July is what lets you turn down a bad job in February.

06 Don't panic-discount

The one to avoid. A quiet week makes a cheap job look like a good job. It usually isn't, and it costs more than the empty week would have.

Two reasons. The price you take in February is the price that customer expects in June, and the price they quote to their friends. And a cheap job eats the time you needed for the five things above.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- If you have to move on something, move something other than the price. A small extra thrown in, or a better date, both cost you less than a lower number and neither one resets your rate.
- If you do discount, name it and date it. *"Winter rate, until the end of March"* is a price that goes back up. *"I'll do it for X"* is simply your new price.
- Work out your floor first, from the section above. You cannot tell whether a cheap job is worth taking until you know what an hour costs you.

An empty week costs you a week. A price you can't get back costs you the year.

WHERE TO START

Pick two. Realistically, the first one and whichever of the others you read and thought *I've been meaning to do that*.

Do them properly and you come into spring with work already booked, a list of people who've heard from you recently, and a business that looks like it's worth what you charge for it.

If you want to know where else the money's going while you've got the time, the leaks guide covers ten places it leaves quietly, and the Leak Finder turns it into ten yes-or-no questions about your own business.

Fill the quiet. Book the spring. Hold your price.

Move 04 is the one I can do for you. Send me your website and I'll test your contact form, your phone links, and how you show up on Google. You'll get a short list of fixes within two business days, free, and nothing about it obliges you to anything.

Written by JT Creeden at RedHorseWebDev, who builds websites for small businesses in the Hudson Valley. The whole guide is free to read at redhorsewebdev.com/learn — this PDF is just easier to keep.