

# Community Involvement: How Cleaning Companies Can Drive Social Change

Thu, Apr 18, 2024 3:30PM • 30:58

## SPEAKERS

Tim Clagg, Jason Davis

### **Tim Clagg** 00:08

Welcome to the Business of Cleaning Podcast your number-one source of information on the commercial cleaning industry. We record new episodes monthly live from the Janitorial Manager studio located in Toledo, Ohio. I'm Tim Clagg, the marketing communication specialist here at Janitorial Manager, and your host of The Business of Cleaning Podcast. Today, we welcome in the owner of Forte Commercial Cleaning, Jason Davis. They're based out of Salt Lake City, Utah. Welcome to the program, Jason, we're so glad to have you.

### **Jason Davis** 00:40

Good to be here. Thanks for having me.

### **Tim Clagg** 00:41

Forte Clean, has been making national news in the spotlight the last few months for their community involvement and inclusion. Congratulations on that national attention. We're going to dive into that a little bit later, but I want to give you kudos right off the top for that and your business.

### **Jason Davis** 01:01

Thank you.

### **Tim Clagg** 01:03

So first thing I want to discuss is your background, and how you got involved in commercial cleaning, especially with an economics degree and a prior background in banking.

### **Jason Davis** 01:16

Okay, yeah, good question. Honestly, like you said, I did go to the University of Utah, got my degree in economics, and after, I just kind of got right into banking. Commercial banking, investment banking, just got burned out with the nine-to-five, office environment, and ended up leaving that just quiet pretty abruptly. I didn't have a plan, so get my real estate license, and did that for a while. So, once I got, kind of in the independent world, my wife and I just started looking at business opportunities. She had a friend of hers, that did some commercial cleaning, with some local businesses. We just looked into it, ran the numbers, looked at different types of businesses, and felt like, there were some good opportunities in the commercial cleaning space. So that's kind of what led us into it.

**Tim Clagg** 02:23

How scary is that? Going back looking at that, like you said, kind of quitting abruptly, not having that plan B, to say "hey, well, tomorrow, I'm gonna, I'm gonna do this." How scary was that moment before you decided to get your real estate license? And then have those discussions with your wife?

**Jason Davis** 02:42

Oh, man, it was it was pretty crazy. We were, young and crazy. We already had two kids. We actually got into it when I met one of my business partners. We just really, really wanted to do something, and we actually sold our house and went all into it. I think sometimes, it's scary, for sure. We definitely, thought about that after we did it, and there were a few times we regretted it, but it ended up working out.

**Tim Clagg** 03:24

Okay. So, you know, it's funny, you mentioned your wife at her job of that particular time. She had seen that the commercial cleaners that own the company that cleaned where she was employed, had some success, and you mentioned their partners. What do you remember the most, Jason, from those conversations, that you were very confident walking away? This could be an avenue not only to start a business, but have a career, a longevity!

**Jason Davis** 03:56

Yeah, really, one of the main things for us was, the barrier to entry, which was pretty low. Other businesses, business models that we looked at, require a lot more capital equipment, just stuff we really didn't have access to, we were honestly pretty, pretty poor. We're living paycheck to paycheck and so that was that one of the biggest things and apart from that, just, looking at the industry, we just felt like we could really, we could do it. If you're dedicated there are lots of opportunities. There are not any major players. I mean, there's some big companies but there are a lot of smaller Mom and Pop companies and so we just felt like, this is something that we could get into and, and do good at.

**Tim Clagg** 04:56

So at this point, it's you and your wife, who are kind of the cleaners for your company.

**Jason Davis** 05:02

Yeah, when we first started. So I met my business partner Jasper he and his partner Eric started Forte Commercial Cleaning back in 2008. This was 2016, so we got into it by buying a master franchise, at first, for the northern Utah area. Then in 2019, is when we actually ended up merging together with them to be business partners and part owners of Forte

**Tim Clagg** 05:38

Can you break down going back just when we talked about the biggest startup capital? Breakdown, the essential investments required such as you mentioned, "Well we didn't have enough for equipment", what equipment you put as a high priority; supplies, what insurance and licensing fees were required at the time when you guys said, "you know, what, it's not really that much of a capital that's really going to hurt us on startup".

**Jason Davis** 06:08

Right. So I mean, depending on what you're looking at doing when we started, we just started, I guess what you would call low-hanging fruit apartments. We started doing a lot of apartment buildings, which to do that, I mean, vacuum, a broom, some microfiber rags, and in cleaning chemicals, it's not a lot, couple 100 bucks. Our major expense was that we bought the master franchise, right? So we needed some money, and so that's why we ended up actually selling our house and bought into something that already had some accounts running. So that way, we didn't have to reinvent the wheel, just bought into something at first that was already functioning. That worked out pretty well, for us just to have a little bit of money from the, from the start.

**Tim Clagg** 07:06

Let's talk about that. I find that very interesting sometimes. You know, better and you've seen situations in the banking industry where somebody has come in for what looks on paper, like a sweet deal, right? You've been there, you've seen it, you had some collateral in selling the house, what weighed into that situation, because obviously, you're taking a big risk starting a company. If you take out a loan, there's another big risk involved, so can you kind of take us through that mindset, and what led to you guys kind of deciding the best situation, the best choice for you guys was to sell that house.

**Jason Davis** 07:50

I think it was just pure motivation to be independent, and be a business owner when, I was in school, at U, I did an internship with Salt Lake City Economic Development, and I was part of the revolving loan fund, you know, working with small businesses, getting loans, helping startups that's kind of in that, with that energy, small business startup kind of energy, and we just really wanted to get back into that, it's a really nice kind of feeling to the entrepreneurial, filling in that space, and for us, it was just to do something, I couldn't do the office 9-5 stuff.

**Tim Clagg** 08:40

We're talking to Jason Davis, owner of Forte Commercial Cleaning in Salt Lake City, Utah. Forte, as you mentioned, cleaning started in Utah in 2016. You and your wife were making, just under in our initial conversation, he said, Oh, 5000 a month. Now, fast forward. Eight years doesn't seem like a long time. But I'm sure you know, like they say the struggle is real at first, fast forward those eight short years later, and you are clearing you were telling me around \$525,000 Now comfortably a month. How quickly for you guys, Jason, did you start to see that monthly revenue increase?

**Jason Davis** 09:25

It was a little at first, right? I mean, right off the bat, when we started we actually within the first month, we lost one of the big contracts that we had, we were kind of counting on so I actually I had to pick up another job. I worked at the Walmart distribution center. In three days, I worked 40 hours Friday, Saturday and Sunday when we first started so we actually got off to a really rough, start, but within the first year little by little, I think we picked up about \$20,000 in accounts the first year I ended up getting some solid accounts. And it was actually in our second year when we had a huge opportunity to bid on a big manufacturing plant here in Utah. At first, we didn't even want to bid on everything, because we felt like it was too big for us, but at the time, they had different companies cleaning different parts of it.

And so I'm like, let's bid on everything, and if we get just a little piece of it, that'll be great. The buyer, Barbara called me, and she's like, well, we want you guys to do it, but we want you to do everything. And I was like, Well, no, we can't. she's said, well, it's all or nothing, and so that was kind of what pushed us. And like I said it was, within the first two years, a huge, huge, huge account. And then from there, you know, with that reference, everything really helped us grow and get some other pretty solid accounts.

**Tim Clagg** 10:59

Do you think it's fair to say, like you said, in that first month, you lost one of the bigger contracts? Do you feel like that moment, that experience helped you to prepare for nailing down this big contract in the year? Number two?

**Jason Davis** 11:14

Oh, yeah, when I had that chance to bid we were so motivated, and just so focused on doing everything that we had to do to at least get a piece of that, so I think that really, the struggle that you have going into it helps, when you have presented an opportunity just to, you know, realize what that is, and just be, get that hunger, you know, and motivation to land those, those kinds of accounts. So it was a lot of work. I mean, I've put a spreadsheet, there's like 100 pages, spreadsheet working out all the different, you know, cleaning schedules, and everything, all the equipment and, all the stuff going into it. And just, I mean, it took like six months working on that, and getting that bid and nailing it down. So yeah, I think the, like I said, the struggle, helps feed the hunger and then help, get motivated.

**Tim Clagg** 12:08

And you had mentioned too, we're not sure if we can hit well, it's an all or nothing. So, I'm sure then in there, once that was solidified, then you guys went out and got some employees to help completely. Make sure top to bottom this place was speaking spam.

**Jason Davis** 12:27

Yeah, we went from, almost 100 employees, is a huge account we had, it was a lot of legwork at that point. We had some really good people helping us with, apartments and things very motivated people. There's a really strong community my wife's from Guatemala, I speak more Spanish than I do English. There's a really cool, strong Hispanic community in which we have a lot of friends in. And so they were able just to, pick up, we divided it up into two, sub franchises, different people work different parts of the account. And, we have a lot of really great workers that made it possible. Yeah, it was intense there for a minute.

**Tim Clagg** 13:24

During the intro, kind of teased at the top of the podcast mentioned, Forte, being in the national spotlight. That is due to Forte giving opportunities to homeless people to work and focusing on inclusion. First, I want to applaud you guys, for doing that. Obviously, it's a national crisis everywhere in the United States, and your company's efforts for being so proactive. A lot of people say they want to be involved, and then sometimes they don't follow through. But you guys have and have been a huge benefit to your community. When did you realize that there was a serious need to help give these

people in the community just a chance when 95% of employers would just turn and turn the other cheek and not even not even give them an opportunity or worry?

**Jason Davis** 14:24

Yeah, it was pretty early on, we started cleaning, a stadium where we needed a lot of bodies, a lot of labor, 100 people around that per night after some of the big events and, just trying to figure out how to staff that kind of led us into looking at some different options. We started at first, working there were just a few people who approached us that were, struggling and experiencing some homelessness, and they needed to make some money. And so we let him, really didn't see it as a big deal, hired him and then, but as we, you know, started continued to work, you know, they started referring more people over and started kind of sharing with us, their experiences and so we really kind of started focusing on, on that, they have a hard time finding employment, you know, we don't have an address and things like that have a place to shower and get ready and do interviews or resumes and that kind of thing. So, at that point, we realized it was a really good kind of situation if we can find the right people that are motivated and want to, you know, get back on their feet, because then they can use that as a reference, you know, they can, you know, that paycheck, you know, they can start to get into to more permanent housing and just do things, really, just that first step to get back on their feet.

**Tim Clagg** 16:08

You give a lot of credit to a book that you have read numerous times, The Go Giver, what did that book kind of teach you, and open your eyes about giving back? And some of the biggest lessons that it taught you to take away?

**Jason Davis** 16:25

Yeah, back when I did real estate my stepdad gave me that book, sales related book, about how giving helps you as a salesman, and it's all about just giving, trying to help people do what you can it comes back and helps you give more value in service than what you receive in payment is one of the big things that it talks about. So I just, something we've always tried to implement in our business model, just give opportunities, like, we were given an opportunity, to get into the business and, you know, bid on things, you know, people gave us opportunities. And so, we just really want to, try to give, get back when you can,

**Tim Clagg** 17:28

And with the success working in the community, it's led to referrals from people, from family and friends who are already working within the company, that it's led you guys away from having to go to job recruiting and job sites like indeed.com. So you guys haven't had to go that route, where speaking with a lot of different people on our podcast, they'll have to go maybe, let's say to Indeed, or a recruiting company, to just get some help. So, word of mouth, and just following through, like you said, has led to some tremendous referrals for you guys to be able to land top-notch talent!

**Jason Davis** 18:14

Yeah, honestly. I mean, that was very surprising, not expected to be honest. For some events, now we have to turn people away, because so many people show up. Yeah, we don't do any recruiting, don't use indeed, at all, we tried it, when we first started a little bit, didn't have a lot of success with it, and just

found by, treating the employees, right, creating a good work environment as best we can, even though they could make more money, a lot of times going somewhere else, a lot of times, they'll go and then they'll come back because they are like, "Man, I just like working here. Because the group, the environment, everything" try to have a good, tight-knit group of people and, yes, referrals, get a lot of referrals whenever we have, whenever we get new accounts,

**Tim Clagg 19:13**

And kind of staying true to your word to a lot of people that work in the commercial cleaning industry, maybe in the past have been looked down upon, and prior employers maybe haven't fulfilled their responsibility and followed through with their actions. Well, you guys one of the things that is pretty awesome, and it certainly caught my attention is you pay people daily when they work for you. And, especially in this industry, this is really kind of revolutionary.

**Jason Davis 19:52**

Yeah, I just, do what you got to do. I feel like people really appreciate that. So with a background in commercial banking, knowing some creative options financially, AR financing, and things like that, that we can use to get money in the door, even though we're billing our clients every 30 to 60 days, we can get some money when we need it, and then pay people as fast as we can. Make sure we always, I was surprised that that's a pretty big thing when I first got into the industry, just making sure people get paid. It sounds pretty simple, but they love that. And I think that's a big reason why they come back and refer other people.

**Tim Clagg 20:46**

That's crazy. I used to work in the recruiting industry. And while I used to work here, they were shortening my pay I wasn't getting these hours paid for. And I'm like, wow, that's just so head scratching, because it's something that, I've never been exposed to where, you know, the check is hit the bank account, right? So it is an interesting perspective to kind of put your shoes in and think about, but one of the big accounts, you guys took over in 2019, The Delta Center home of the Utah Jazz in 2019, can we look a little bit into what goes on planning a proposal for a big venue like this, and lining up all the people, they play 83 games a season, half of those are home games. So you got about 40-41 home games, that's 40 Plus nights where you need to fill 100 plus people there, can you discuss that end of things?

**Jason Davis 21:52**

Yeah, and quite honestly, the jazz games are not the hardest. I mean, we do the monster trucks and all the Disney on Ice events, and all the events, and concerts are not bad. But, you get the rodeos and monster trucks and stuff like that, that is a lot more challenging to clean up after, but it's been a work in progress, it still is, you know, a work in progress, there's always new challenges and things. When we started, we started bringing about 10 people per night. And with that, amount of people wasn't really making any money, but I was actually there when we started it, I was, boots on the ground, there, figuring it out, trying to see how things worked, talking to the managers and just, trying to understand how the whole process in the building work so little by little, once we started to understand the different schedules and, different tasks that needed to be done, cleaning the suites going down to the bathrooms, even in the players that, area down there in the high-security areas. We've even had

people help, changing out the courts, breaking up the ice, after Disney on Ice, all that kind of stuff. And so it was just, little by little. The other companies, they just send people there, because they had a lot of companies and they just send people there blindly, without even any supervisors or anything, so I think it was just taking that time to kind of go in and really understand and find out how everything worked. And little by little, now we're one of the only companies they still have a few others, but we're definitely the largest.

**Tim Clagg** 23:35

Some new business owner listening to this episode here this month, and they're trying to build their team build their talent and their culture, based around inclusion. What are some of the biggest pieces of advice that you would tell them right off the bat today to be successful?

**Jason Davis** 24:06

Pretty, basic stuff, honestly. I mean, don't judge a book by its cover. Main, probably one of the biggest things, you know, give people a chance. Especially if they're, referrals, I think that helps a lot. We've had very, very few issues with people that have come over on referrals. So, you know, but find a space even maybe you wouldn't have him work at a bank or something. But accounts is depending on the account, there are definitely opportunities to employ, almost everybody it takes a lot I think to to not be employable at all so, yeah, I think just basically give people a chance.

**Tim Clagg** 24:54

And some of these people that you have given opportunities to have been rather successful! I know I was watching one of the news stations that picked up and did a really nice feature on you guys. But talked about one of your employees, Joy, who moved from Michigan to Utah and was homeless, you guys gave her an opportunity to work there, purchased her own apartment, you guys helped her pay for, furniture for her place. When you see a kind of redemption story like that, what does it do for you inside of, your heart and your chest? What does it do? For you to see that redemption story? Come around?

**Jason Davis** 25:42

Yeah, I mean, obviously, it feels good. It's a really good feeling to see that and see the system work, especially, going back to when I was in school studying economics and things and being involved in the business community, I always, felt like, through for profit, business, businesses and corporations, business owners, can have an impact doesn't have to just be charities and government, and stuff like that. But actually, for-profit businesses, can do things to have a social impact. So, it's kind of nice to see that that is possible sometimes.

**Tim Clagg** 26:33

So, along with creating those new beginnings for people, you're helping them gain skills to build in a resume because sometimes after they've got that experience, it is time for them to kind of move on. And what is it like to be able to give people those skills to, you've had several people who have come work for you guys that have been off the streets that now are, had success with you guys built that resume up, and were able to go outside and continue their career path, whatever that might be. That's got to feel pretty, pretty special overall.



**Jason Davis** 27:22

Yeah, I mean, that's the goal, to just be more of a stepping stone, or if there are opportunities to grow within the company that's another great thing to have happen. Yeah, that's the ideal outcome, to have some kind of progression and move on to something better.

**Tim Clagg** 27:46

And you guys have some other exciting things coming up. I know, you guys were, when we talked kind of looking at locking down another big contract. I know, you said sometimes you got to turn away some people, but if this one happens, I don't think you're going to have to turn away anybody from work at all in the future.

**Jason Davis** 28:04

Yeah, that honestly, that's the struggle, find enough work to keep everybody busy. Just keep finding more and more things and continue to grow and keep trying to find more opportunities and provide as many opportunities as we can. So we're happy whenever we get a chance to do that.

**Tim Clagg** 28:30

How do you continue to challenge yourself? You know, I'm sure your goal of being in this industry, for yourself as a person has changed probably a handful a dozen times where, "okay, we can check this one off, check this off". So for you to be so successful with your company, how do you continue to raise your expectations to raise your goals as well?

**Jason Davis** 29:03

Yeah, just having those goals set continuously setting, you know, new goals. Working to achieve them, right now, I'm working on some stuff to expand. We've really been focused just on the Utah market or looking to expand, the operations to other markets. And there's so many opportunities. It's, you know, it's almost unlimited, you know, opportunities available. So I don't think we'll ever run out of goals to set and just keep on, keep on pushing.

**Tim Clagg** 29:42

And the forecast for the industry, is nothing but sunny skies right now and forward as well. Jason, I want to thank you for coming on this month's episode and discussing inclusion, and so many valuable topics to our listeners. How can people find your guy's website and along with following you guys on social media?

**Jason Davis** 30:07

Yeah for Forte Commercial Cleaning.com It's kind of a long one but you know, Google Forte Commercial Cleaning you know, all of our stuff. We're actively working on being better at social media. So here in the next coming months, you should see we're even possibly going to start a YouTube channel. So we're, also we're, that's all in the works.

**Tim Clagg** 30:31



I will look forward to kind of tracking that progress. Thank you again for coming on here. That will conclude this month's episode of The Business of Cleaning Podcast, be sure to subscribe to us on Spotify, Apple podcasts, Amazon podcasts, or wherever you get your podcast from, from everyone at janitorial manager, our guest for this month. Jason Davis. I'm Tim Clagg. So long. Until next time!