

From Friends To Business Partners: Conquering Stereotypes In Commercial Cleaning

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SPEAKERS

Tim Clagg, Illissa Figueroa, Ana Chicas McNamara

Tim Clagg 00:00

Welcome to The Business of Cleaning Podcast your number one source for information on the commercial cleaning industry. We release new episodes monthly live from the Janitorial Manager studio located in Toledo, Ohio. I'm Tim Clagg, the marketing communication specialist here at Double A Solutions and your host of The Business of Cleaning Podcast. Today, we have two very special guests, we welcome in the owners of Preferred Capital Cleaning; Ana Chicas McNamara, Illissa Figueroa , and you guys are based out of our nation's capital, Washington, DC. Ladies, we're so glad to have you part of this month's show.

Illissa Figueroa 00:37

Thank you, Tim.

Ana Chicas McNamara 00:39

Thank you for having us.

Tim Clagg 00:41

It's a very interesting story, and we're gonna dive right into it here; Preferred capital Cleaning registered back in 2016. However, the path to get here in 2020, there was a lot of time, a lot of effort that went into this. You ladies were working for another company, and working both jobs until early 2020. When, of course, everything changed in the world. How are you guys able to juggle and manage both jobs and not have a conflict of interest in your schedules at all?

Illissa Figueroa 01:19

So we both work for a construction cleaning company, two different companies. The way we managed that conflict of interest was by pursuing janitorial contracts because both companies weren't interested in doing that.

Ana Chicas McNamara 01:35

When we presented the idea of "Hey, we should look into janitorial, we do construction", the owners of the company, were not interested in the janitorial side of things. They were like "we know the

construction, let's just stick to what we know". So that's how we saw an opportunity to say "Hey we know cleaning, we love cleaning, they don't want to do janitorial, we can have PCC doing janitorial."

Tim Clagg 02:03

How were you guys able to take the tools during your day job, at this point, and apply some key factors into what you guys were doing for Preferred Capital during this time?

Ana Chicas McNamara 02:22

It was a lot of legwork knocking on doors. So, weekends, we started off with meeting once a month to talk about our business plan. Then also how do we start generating some income, right? So, we just made some business cards, we would put them on doors to clean houses and see "Oh, someone's doing a renovation in their house, let's see if we can clean that house". Then we would also just knock on businesses and just drop off our business card on the weekends letting them know that we do janitorial cleaning.

Tim Clagg 03:02

You mentioned meeting one time a month. What are some of the most memorable things about those meetings over the course of building your blueprint for your guys' business? What are some key takeaways that you guys remember now in 2024, about those meetings?

Illissa Figueroa 03:21

So I remember meeting and we still have those notebooks to this day. coming up with well, "how are we going to grow?" and outlining our projections and what we needed. Okay, "we need this many people to hit this target number, and what is it going to take to get to that amount of people"? And what are we going to need to provide to those people, supply a vehicle, basically setting a budget, how much is the vehicle going to cost? How much is their labor? How much is their labor going to cost us? We look at those projections and compare them to now and we've surpassed them by leaps and bounds. So insane. I mean, there was a long time where and we still to this day, and we would look at each other and we're like, look where we are today compared to. We look at that notebook and say, look what we wrote here. We sound so silly now looking back.

Ana Chicas McNamara 04:22

I remember with those numbers, I was so nervous. We're like, "oh my god, we're gonna try to hit a goal of \$300,000 a year or 200 that I think we started very-

04:35

-conservative, extremely conservative.

Ana Chicas McNamara 04:39

So we're like, \$200,000 a year in revenue and janitorial and she said, surpass that and it's a good feeling and it's also nice to reflect on our first meetings and where we are now in our growth.

Tim Clagg 04:56

I love the fact that you've kept those notebooks it could be something you guys put in a shadowbox, a frame and put inside your big conference room when you have clients coming in for a great conversation.

Illissa Figueroa 05:10

We thought about doing that with the evolution of our business cards. We're on our, like, fourth generation of our business cards. And I was telling Anna, one day I'm like, "I keep all our old ones because one day, I just want to compare them", and she said, "Me too." So we'll probably put that in a little shrine box at some point and display it here in our office just so people can see the evolution of, all of the things that we've done.

Tim Clagg 05:36

I find it so interesting. Normally, we hear about lifelong friends that maybe go into business together or families, your story, it's very unique, you connected at that job, you'd worked together, and you'd known each other for only six months. So what attracted you guys, as far as working? You're bringing the idea of, "Okay, we have this vision, we want to work together". But how quickly did your relationship connect in friendship and business? So, at the time, I was looking for another job and a mutual friend connected us and we started working together. And I think it was six months by the time we registered the business. But at the time I approached her, I had only known her for two months but felt like a lifetime. Like when we started working together, our relationship was just so organic. And we just worked so well together. I mean, it just flowed. It didn't take any effort. And I had never experienced a working relationship of that nature that was so effortless. And so I always knew that I wanted to be a business owner. And I just didn't know, what field or what type of business I wanted to have. But when I met her I saw her worth and that work ethic and everything that she put into working for and with someone else. And I knew I had a strong work ethic, I said, Hey, I think this is someone that I can partner with. And I think I've figured out what I want to do what, what I want to be the owner of. And I approached her and then she was like, "Oh, yeah, you know, I thought about it". Who was a little more confident, and who was a little more apprehensive?

Ana Chicas McNamara 07:50

I would say I was, nervous. I mean, I've been doing this since 2008 for someone else, and I was very comfortable. I was happy, the stress, I left them at the office, I came home and I didn't worry about them. This is different. We are constantly talking and thinking and breathing and sleeping our business. I'm always thinking about Prefer Capital Cleaning. But yeah, I was nervous. And I'm like, well, we need lots of money. And she was like you do everything from top to bottom for this company, everything. The owners of the business don't even know what goes into day-to-day like we can do this like, and I'm like, we need money and she's like, we can figure that out. And we did. We started like we said, the janitorial side was really great for us because it wasn't conflicting with anything that we were currently doing. We were able to grow a nest egg. And that's how we kept going. And now we love the janitorial side of things. Like we love the construction because that's what we know. But now, getting to know the janitorial side, it's a whole new world that I wish we would have dived into a lot sooner and it's, great. It's rewarding. We keep people busy. The money's consistent. So it's such a great industry to be in and I think COVID really helped to put us in the front line. Nobody ever thought about the people that go in

there and clean your office and keep you safe from germs and all those things. But it really put a spotlight on cleaning in 2020.

Tim Clagg 09:42

That's when you both went full-time with the company a week before everything changed in 2020 in March of course, and this is when you put all your attention and everything towards Preferred Capital. Then a week later, everything came to a screeching halt. If, at that point, we're going full time here, we're going 100%. What do you remember about the emotions you were feeling at this time? And did you maybe feel like, hey, you know what, this may present an opportunity right out of the gates for us to become more involved? Win more contracts, win more bids in the janitorial land of things.

Ana Chicas McNamara 10:23

It didn't, because everything shut down. So the thing that we were doing before with knocking on doors wasn't, available to us. That's when we were able to shift gears and also focus on the construction side of things because now there's no conflict of interest. And we reached out to clients that we knew. And there was such a need because construction actually didn't slow down.

Illissa Figueroa 10:57

Yeah didn't shut down it was all of the workers were considered essential. And I remember early on, they even had to have a card from their employer stating that they were going to a job in case they got pulled over by the police or anything, because, it was a virus that people didn't know anything about. And we were all trying to figure out how to navigate it, and how do we still work together and not contaminate each other. It was definitely an interesting time.

Ana Chicas McNamara 11:33

And actually, I know a lot of businesses shut down. But we're fortunate that the businesses and the contracts that we did have with the janitorial side did not businesses that are still thriving, and we were fortunate enough that our contracts kept going during COVID as well. And they recommended us to other clients as well, hey, these cleaners here are doing our, day-to-day disinfecting, and gave us opportunities like that as well.

Tim Clagg 12:04

Is it fair to say to that with the contracts you had the relationships during COVID, after were strengthened because of the challenges everybody was facing?

Illissa Figueroa 12:15

Yes.

Tim Clagg 12:16

Awesome. And, you know, I'm so interested, too, with your guy's background in both construction and janitorial. Have you guys found or pinpointed any similarities between the two where you have kind of gone back to the drawing board?

Illissa Figueroa 12:33

I don't think we found anything where we need to visit the drawing board. But I definitely find a camp commonality. You know, everyone thinks that you're just one phone call away and that you can send someone in the next two hours. And that is for both industries, I think consistently would you say?

Ana Chicas McNamara 12:57

I think one of the things that sets us apart too, is that we know the building while it's being built. So when we get in there after we get the janitorial contract. We already know the building, we've seen it even before there was drywall. We also finally cleaned the exterior of the building and, so this is like a one-off that the client before was looking to, another company to do but now we're a one-stop shop, because "hey, they also cleaned the outside of my building, they also power wash, they also kept the grounds clean during construction". So they're able to look at us and not have to look for another cleaning company that can perform the stuff that we do know how to perform.

Tim Clagg 13:45

For the first year, being in business, neither one of you guys was paying yourself or taking a paycheck, it was all going into business and 100% to your employees. This to me shows your value and how seriously you put your employees above everything. How do you continue to balance and prioritize, especially employee schedules? When maybe, some things are a little difficult or maybe certain jobs a little slower? How do you maintain that, perfect balance for everybody in their in their situation within the business?

Illissa Figueroa 14:27

So we spend less personally and on the business side because you have to have money for those rainy days. And when you have your own business, rainy days come more often than you'd like. And in terms of our jobs, we have moments when we're slow and to offset that we just keep people working by maybe overstaffing our jobs a little more. Having them help out with additional things in the office helps us organize, tools and equipment or uniforms for training. So means we focus on training as well.

Ana Chicas McNamara 15:07

So when we're a little slow, they come in for training. And they're also getting paid to do that. I mean, it's very important. And it's also good because when we're really busy, then we're not trying to figure out where we can schedule some training lessons that we constantly do, it's just a big need or refresher or reminder. So when it does slow down a little bit, it's helpful to get those training lessons.

Tim Clagg 15:36

I love to hear that because training, you can never have too much of things or things in the evolution of the business changing as far as equipment, whether it's PPE, which is still so important. One of the things I admire about what you guys have done is you guys are predominantly made up of female employees, 80% and 100% minority in your employees, what personal pride do you guys take in this, creating new opportunities and changing industry trends?

Illissa Figueroa 16:17

We're very happy to be women business owners, that's not very common. And that helps sets us apart. And we are able to provide opportunities to a field force that most people think is supposed to stay

home and take care of the children, right? So they're able to kind of do it all, we provide them an opportunity, they can work. And they're able to provide for their families, in addition to other income that they might have from their partner, they're able to exercise their skills, and learn and grow from there and, get promoted, we have people that started as cleaners, we've known for a while they've been with us since the beginning in 2020. And they come to us and say, "Hey, I was able to put a downpayment on my home, because you gave me an opportunity, I was able to put a down payment on a new car because of the opportunity that you provided me" and so we take a lot of pride in that.

Tim Clagg 17:27

Now with over 100 employees as well. Now, how have you guys been able to kind of focus now, on the business side instead of working in it, because I know you guys came from the ground up, like Drake's that start from the bottom now we're here. You know, you ladies were in the trenches. So now having that trust, having the employees to fit your team, everything you're looking for, what allowed you guys to focus on running the business?

Ana Chicas McNamara 17:57

I mean, yes, we started, I remember waking up at four in the morning to be at the location at five in the morning, before the offices opened up and being there and I was pregnant at the time and cleaning, I was out there cleaning with our employees. We're not in those trenches still, but I feel like we still are in the trenches. But luckily, we have, like you said, put people in place to help us grow. And at first, it's a little hard to give up that trust. But we realized that we weren't going to grow or get to where we are now if we didn't trust others to do that. So yeah, I mean, it's been very helpful to have a good team and we continue to hire with or promote within, we just hired. We're really big on promoting within - people who have helped us get to where we at are should be the ones that you know, reap the benefits of all their hard work as well.

Tim Clagg 19:08

Knowing as an employee, that there's going to be an opportunity for growth, you know, some companies you hear about, well, I don't know how to motivate my employees. That's motivation right there. Okay, I can, I can come in here on day one is a cleaner. And I know that, you know, literally I can reach the ceiling with the opportunities that are provided in front of me in a lot of places don't offer them.

Illissa Figueroa 19:32

Yeah, we like to encourage our employees and we tell them, we promote independence. And we tell them, you gotta be independent. We've had a lot of people that relied on public transportation and sometimes public transportation isn't even open and running. By the time they need to get to a job we're like "The way you solve that problem, you have to learn how to drive get your license". We have a lot of people who have gotten their license and have been able to purchase a vehicle that they can use to get to and from work so that they're not missing opportunities and what we always tell them, we want you to be the best you that you can be, we want better for you. And if that means, leaving us to go somewhere else for a better opportunity, we're not here to hold you back, we want you to grow as much as you can. And if we have an opportunity available for you, where we can promote you, such as an

operations manager, safety officer, or project manager, we're more than willing to do that. And we talk to our employees, and we stay involved with them all the time.

Tim Clagg 20:45

That's so fantastic to hear. And I want to kind of go back and I know, we were talking about how to kind of turn things off. And that's something I know, can be very difficult for you. Matter of fact, listening and preparing for this interview. You were taking calls while you were about to give birth to both of your children. How have you ladies know now, when you know, to turn it off a little bit, so, to speak?

Illissa Figueroa 21:17

I think it's like, I don't think it's ever a turn-off. Because it's like watching TV on mute. You still have the playing in the background.

Tim Clagg 21:28

I love that comparison.

Illissa Figueroa 21:32

Never really off.

Ana Chicas McNamara 21:34

Yeah I mean, the kids are getting older. So now, they require a lot more of my attention, because now they can tell if I'm still answering emails, answering calls. So as soon as I get home at five, I don't look at my phone for work purposes until the next day. And weekends. Also, I was constantly checking stuff, but it wasn't something that needed to be addressed at that time. So now I'm able to just put it on mute until I come back. Enjoy my time with my family a lot more. Again, I think the biggest part is having key players and people that are great team leaders for us. And we know that we're in good hands. So, for a long time, Illissa and I could not take vacations together. So like she would go on her birthday trip and I'm one of her best friends but I was never on those birthday trips because someone had to be here to manage the field and the scheduling and everything else that goes with it. But now we have people in place to do that. And now we're able to actually go on vacation together.

Tim Clagg 22:58

And as employees to that's got to feel good knowing okay, we don't have to worry about them checking in, we've got that trust that that perfect harmony, right, the perfect balance and the owners, the employees and we can get things done, even in 2024 still facing some challenges, especially women in the industry and in the workforce in general in every industry. What are those challenges that you guys particularly see in the commercial cleaning industry? And how can the industry continue to work to erase these issues?

Illissa Figueroa 23:39

I think one of the major problems that we face is that people think that they can talk to us any kind of way because we're women and they think that we're not fully aware of what we signed with our contracts and they like to use that and throw it in our face and it's not so much there's still some people in the construction side that are very you know, "I've been doing this", and "back in my day" They never

think we're the owners like it's so funny certain people just don't think we're the owners. We're very present we go to our sites we go to our offices and the places that we maintain. I guess there's still a little bit of ignorance, but for the most part people are respectful and there are a lot more ladies women in the construction field. I know we've been to a few the ISSA, there are so many women that are in high power pole positions that we met at these conventions. So I think we're turning that around where there was less women owners. And now there's more. And there's also like a community of us, we have met so many wonderful business owners at these events. And, it's so nice to see the empowerment and the encouragement, and, oh, this is what I use. And this is how I do certain things. It's it's, it's nice to see that in the janitorial industry, there is a community of women very tight-knit.

Tim Clagg 25:46

Tight knit community that is very engaging, and very welcoming. So those challenges that when you came in in 2008, you've seen the progress. So looking ahead, what other opportunities will take to create more opportunities? I know, looking, you mentioned ISSA. And I know a lot of the spring conferences that I've seen the agendas for have had a lot of female-led workshops, which is fantastic. What other things or ideas do you guys have that could certainly help that aspect?

Illissa Figueroa 26:27

I mean, this is a relationship business, right? And the best way to keep progressing and keep growing is by building those relationships, getting the repeat work, feeding off of each other brainstorming, you know what's working for you, and maybe introducing that into our business and our day-to-day.

Ana Chicas McNamara 26:57

I think being in front of people as well, just the connection, just these, organizations are really good to stay in front of people that have the same issues and problems that we have, and just how do you deal with certain things and, as we said before, everybody's very supportive and engaging. And I think that's very helpful being part of these organizations and helping us grow.

Tim Clagg 27:25

We're talking with Ana and Illissa from Preferred Capital Cleaning, the owners of Preferred Capital Cleaning based out of Washington, DC, networking, is one of the most important things free tools that there really is in the industry, can you guys discuss the role of networking in your efforts, not only to establish or build new relationships, but also to with building those relationships can help you secure some new contracts for your business.

Ana Chicas McNamara 27:55

So for example, I saw someone this weekend at a winery, someone very high up for a general contractor that we work for. And he said I saw that you had a safety meeting last week with all your employees. That's great. And I'm like, yes, I did. And it was refreshing and nice to hear someone so high up in this firm, he noticed that. And I was like, hey, I know you guys are looking for the cleaner for the new hospital that is being built. Well, he says, shoot me a message on Monday. And I'll make sure that you get an invite for that. I didn't even get to the office. And I had already seen the invite for that hospital come out. And then this morning, he texted me and "hey, it's so and so I need help at another location." Can you help me out and so it's those personal relationships really help. LinkedIn really helps

because you think that no one's looking and he wasn't even someone that hit like, on my post, but he saw it and it was someone that is very influential in their firm. So that was very nice. So, it's, I'm a big social media advocate. So, I think once a week is probably really good, show showcase what you're working on showcasing all the things that are happening without us.

Tim Clagg 29:37

And also to I know some people may not be social butterflies or comfortable stepping outside their comfort zone, but this is an area where you have to work at it you have to grow, to build those kinds of relationships and to help your business as well. So how important is it what are some things you can, that you would recommend to some people who are maybe kind of struggling with that a little bit.

Ana Chicas McNamara 30:05

Well, Illissa wasn't always the social butterfly. And then when we would go out to these networking events or organizations like Illissa just kind of sat back and listened and took notes and took it all in and the chatterbox of the two. But now you wouldn't even know that by meeting us at a networking event, because she's just as chatty as me. I don't know, what did you do to overcome that?

Illissa Figueroa 30:34

You know, you just have to step out of your comfort zone and realize that not speaking to people is a missed opportunity. You have to speak, you have to get to know others to develop your relationships. It's an investment, basically, the more people you talk to the more opportunities that present it so and you're fostering better and longer relationships by doing that.

Tim Clagg 31:08

Business Development is a part of any successful company, I know, that's one area where you guys are looking in 2024. What advice can you give other owners, maybe somebody that's new in the industry, when they're looking to grow and focus on the business development side of things? Where would they begin? When you guys sat down for 2024, how did you guys get started?

Ana Chicas McNamara 31:35

I think one of the things that people should look at is, people want to buy and, work with people they like and trust. And so for us, it worked out that people liked and were interested in us. And so we kind of were selling Ana and Illissa like, PCC is Ana and Illissa and we will make sure that we're always going to help you. You can always reach out to our open-door policy. Positive feedback, like anything you want to talk to us about, we're here. So we definitely saw that aspect of it like PCC is Anna and Illissa . So I think people knowing that we're the owners is something that goes a long way like, "Oh, wow, like, I'm not just talking to, you know, someone in their office that those are the owners" but also so I think that helped us grow to where we are now. Now in 2024 we went out and hired a business development person and we needed it because we can't like she said, miss opportunities when you're not talking to certain people, right, and there are so many organizations and, events and that we felt it was time for us to hand the baton to someone that can help us grow the janitorial side and the construction side of things. So make sure that that person also sees your vision and understands your vision, for your company's growth and where we want to head in the direction you're heading in. I think the person that we hired is a great fit. She's wonderful people have said great things about meeting her and she seems

to really like the role and I think yeah, just someone that can understand your vision and your goal and we understand that not every no one's gonna ever love PCC the way Illissa and Anna do but at least see the growth and the vision and want to grow with us. I think that's key.

Tim Clagg 33:56

Ana, Illissa I'm curious to get your guys' thoughts of 2024. Right now, what industry challenges for companies? Have you guys seen in your area? I'm kind of curious to ask because we've had guests from Canada, we've had guests from all over California, Washington. I'm curious kind of on the East Coast, what challenges companies are dealing with in 2024 in the industry, where you guys are located.

Illissa Figueroa 34:24

We definitely have to focus on standing out from the competition. I mean, this is a saturated market with the cleaning. And we're constantly sitting down and strategizing. Okay, what can we do to help us stand out from everyone else, and one of the things we focus on, as you know, safety but another major thing that we focus on is presentation how you look, we tell our people all the time, first impressions are everything. We want to show up on time we want to show up presentable it doesn't matter that you're cleaner, you want to look presentable and you want to show up with the tools to get your job done, you want to make sure that your shirt is tucked in, you know, your pants don't have any holes, you have the adequate footwear, you know, look presentable people. Again, back to her statement, people want to work with people that they like. And if they interest and if they don't know you, the first thing that they're looking at is how how you look and

Tim Clagg 35:28

how your first impression is...

Ana Chicas McNamara 35:32

So challenging here in this area, like she said, very saturated. So we're trying to stand out. Another thing that I guess is challenging in this area is we've seen jobs slowed down tremendously. And that was never an issue here in the DC market, we are in a nice bubble, that no matter what was happening in the world, we were never affected by it. And right now,

Illissa Figueroa 36:03

that COVID has changed that we're definitely suffering some effects from that. A lot of jobs aren't like they're delayed, because they don't have all the supplies that they ordered maybe a year ago, because factoring slow down. And spaces that we were told would be ready for us or contracts that we were told would be ready for us because the tenant was moving in for us to begin our janitorial contracts are still not ready because they're still waiting for those materials to finish their project so that we can go in there and, and clean and maintain their space.

Ana Chicas McNamara 36:42

Water also has been an issue with a lot of our projects. It's weird before the city of DC wasn't taking as long to give permits and get water to these new buildings. And it seems like 50%, if not more of our buildings, the construction has been completed, but we're not able to go in there and perform the

cleans that we need to because the city is delay the water them turning on the water. So yeah, you wouldn't think that's a big deal. But for cleaning?

Tim Clagg 37:15

Yeah,

Ana Chicas McNamara 37:16

it's a big deal, right? We really need water.

Tim Clagg 37:20

How have these challenges made you guys pivot from Plan A to go to plan B? For the company?

Ana Chicas McNamara 37:30

So with the water situation, we're always thinking of ways how can we go around it right? The general contractors, for the most part have been very helpful in getting us assisting us with water. So if there's a hydrant somewhere on site, we have hoses and we're putting them into the building and, and their laborers are filling up big 55 gallon drums of water and they're caught like so as one is empty. They're constantly filling them up. So we're working together to still meet our goals and deadlines with clients with the water situation. And as far as staffing, I mean, again, it's very difficult to because it's such a saturate. It's a great area, but it's also very saturated with competition. So we're constantly thinking of ways to stand apart from the others.

Tim Clagg 38:35

And doing the little things, the little things add up to be a lot like you guys are putting up exactly. In the background. It's those little things using your brand colors and logos, company names you. There's this if there's a space, it can fit on it. I want to thank you both for coming on this month's episode of The Business of Cleaning podcast talking about your journey, some challenges that you guys are continuing to overcome and deal with, especially right now in the DC area and sharing your networking tips. Where can people find you guys on social media as well as your guys company website?

Illissa Figueroa 39:18

So our website is Preferred Capitol Cleaning with an O capitol with an O. And if you Google us you'll see all of our social media platforms. We're on LinkedIn, we're on Facebook, we're on Instagram. Yeah, we're not on Tik Tok.

Tim Clagg 39:42

Right. Exactly. That is very, very true. Thank you ladies for coming on. And we can't wait to talk to you guys here in the future as well.

Ana Chicas McNamara 39:53

Thank you.

Illissa Figueroa 39:54

Thank you, Tim. So much for having

Tim Clagg 39:57

this will conclude this month's edition of The Business of Cleaning podcast. Be sure to subscribe on Spotify, Apple podcasts, Amazon podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts from. Also, be sure to leave us a five-star review and your comments from everyone a janitorial manager, our guests, Ana McNamara and Illissa Figueroa. I'm Tim Clagg So long! Until next time!