



# STRETCHING

*the Fence Season*

**C**an you switch from stretching chain-link to hanging Christmas lights when the traditional fence season is over?

Many fencers say they have a love/hate thing going with this time of year — they love being so busy, they hate asking customers to wait for product or installation because crews are stretched thin or — even worse — some rainy weather has left the schedule even more behind. On the other hand, a few months from now, when the weather is tougher in many parts of the country, business may slow to the point of laying off crews.

Fencepost wondered what fencers do when they can't install fences? So, we asked.

Many fencers — in even the coldest parts of the country — say they go right on selling and installing fence throughout the winter. Joe McCarthy of the Allen Fence Company in Dearborn, Michigan, says that in his business — which is mostly commercial fencing — customers can't wait for good weather, so they install all year round. His crews use a compressor or jack hammer on frozen ground and have found that they can mix cement even at 22-25-degrees if they incorporate additives to keep the mixture from freezing.

Bill Benner, CFP, Rudl Fencing and Decking in Glen Gardner, New Jersey, says that despite bad weather his crews are often busy until December or even January. He tries to work around bad weather, encouraging estimating in spite of the weather so



installations are ready to go. His crews also spend time fabricating wood fence for stock, so they're ready to install when the weather breaks.

Like Benner, many fencers take advantage of "down time" to build ready-to-install fence sections as well as maintain equipment, stockpile gates, dog kennels, baseball cages, arbors, flag poles, mailboxes, and other materials they make to sell from their showrooms. But, he says, a lot of products that are closely allied with the fencing season — gazebos, pools or

sheds for example — are also at their busiest in the same season as fences.

### Indoor fencing

Indoor fencing represents a significant marketplace, as much as \$100 million according to Milt Tandy, Sales Manager for Wirecrafters, manufacturer of woven wire partitions. Tandy says the indoor fencing is used in warehouses and factories to secure tools, machinery and more.

Although chain-link may also be installed indoors, the woven wire panels offer some

advantages. They are manufactured with a steel frame, then installed on uprights with welded base plates. Wirecrafters even supplies floor anchors. In traditional chain-link installations, Tandy says, the uprights have to be welded to a base or installers have to core drill the floor. The woven wire partitions don't have to be stretched. They're just bolted together.

The finished cages are especially secure since all hardware is on the inside. The panels can accommodate a variety of locks, including card readers, key pads, full-width push bars for emergency exits, and electric door openers.

Tandy points out that fencers already know how to take dimensions. All they need to provide to Wirecrafters is a drawing or sketch of the proposed installation; the company will produce all the necessary parts and is able to ship from stock within 48 hours. Panels can be as large as 10-feet wide by 5-feet high and can be stacked to suit the necessary dimensions.

Adding indoor fencing to your company's product lines does not necessarily guarantee off season work. Although Benner installs indoor fence in warehouses, factories, and similar sights, and he has some commercial customers who understand that price and installation on interior fence can be easier in the "off season," customers often can't time inside installation for bad weather.

### Building a second niche around the holiday season

Christmas Decor, Inc. is a Lubbock, Texas-based franchisor that has put more than 350 entrepreneurs in 48 states and Canada into the holiday & event decorating business. "It's also a great way to boost your seasonal profits and offer an additional service to your customers—this is a high-margin business," says company president, Blake Smith.

The holiday-decoration business has a number of benefits to fence builders. Companies that slow down during the winter can keep staff busy from November through January. Eliminating the lay-off/rehire cycle for employees assures a more competent staff in the long run. Fencers-turned-holiday-decorators use existing vehicles and other equipment to generate additional revenue. Most importantly, three-season businesses can provide serv-



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ices to their existing customer base year-round through holiday decorating. The extended service raises the company's visibility and helps expand clientele for the next season. Takedown and storage services offer additional income opportunities in January and beyond.

"We bought a Christmas Decor franchise to keep our employees busy year round," said Todd Walker, owner of Touchstone Fence Company in Webster, New Hampshire. "It's a fun business, and there's some real money there. You can stay extremely focused during the winter season."

Smith stresses that holiday displays aren't just for homeowners. Commercial customers look to enhance their businesses with well-done installations. Seasonal professionals can turn this work into an introduction to their primary line of work.

Christmas Decor offers franchisees a full range of materials and support services, including uniforms, marketing materials, and operational manuals—as well as an intensive four-day training program. Toll-free telephone support rounds out the franchise package.

### Finishing touches for the fences you've installed

As an alternative – or in addition to – capturing business in a decidedly off season, some fencers have found ways to expand their fence business and keep crews working beyond their busiest installation season.

One option is to offer an add-on like staining and sealing. Brent Turner's family has been in the business of manufacturing

wood-protection products since 1952, but it wasn't until about 10 years ago, when his dad put Turner to work staining the family's own fence, that the marketplace for what has become the company's Wood Defender product line became clear.

Initially, says Turner, the idea was simply to protect a new wood fence. He used a product the company had been producing for some time for the Dallas area and discovered it had a number of application benefits. First, because it's a penetrating stain, occasional lap marks and drips are easily absorbed into the wood. Unlike other finishes, such as paint, which need to be atomized with water for spray application, this product can be sprayed at a much lower pressure, eliminating most over spraying and clean up. When the stain does land on siding or glass, it's easily cleaned with dish soap and water or degreasers.

One of the greatest benefits, says Turner, is that it's fast to apply. The average job of 150 linear feet takes just about an hour to

complete. This means a small crew can do several jobs in one day. The product is VOC compliant in all fifty states and, since it's not temperature sensitive, it can be applied in cold weather as long as the wood it's applied to is not frozen. The company even runs classes to teach application.

Turner points out that all fence bids have the necessary measurements to include a separate bid for finishing the fence with stain. Fencers already have a relationship with the buyer and a crew in the customer's yard. He believes a bid for staining should be part of every wood fence you install. Turner adds that in his experience, the last thing the fence customer wants is to stain the new fence.

From a practical point of view, shifting one or two crews from installation to one of these niche businesses – or another – is a great way to keep people on the payroll that you don't want to lose, to sell additional services to existing customers and to develop others for the future. And it goes without saying that they're profitable add-ons to any business. ☛

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