

NEW DEAL\$ FOR DOLLAR TREE

Executing a successful project rollout — under extreme time constraints. | **Sam Lovelace**

Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick...”

Many of us grew up learning “Jack be nimble...” and we recite it with our own children along with so many other nursery rhymes. Their meaning has been lost through centuries of retelling, but I think “Jack be nimble...” applies to the work we execute everyday in the facilities management business.

In the competitive retail facilities services environment we operate in, immediate service with a high quality of work is a standard expectation. If you can't deliver, stay out of the way — or don't “jump over the candlestick.”

Given this high performance environment, companies need to learn, adapt and act in a nimble, flexible and highly organized way in order to succeed. A recent experience of Dollar Tree Stores highlights the importance of having the right infrastructure and a strong team of people who “get it” in place before a critical project can be executed.

THE CHALLENGE

In 2006, Dollar Tree Stores acquired the Midwestern retail chain, Deal\$. Dollar Tree needed to re-brand 120 Deal\$ stores in eight states in a very short time. The team had 4 months

to complete this project in order to be ready for the critical back-to-school shopping season. An advertising campaign announcing the grand opening of the new re-branded stores was already in the works, reinforcing the unavoidable, drop-dead deadline. Missing the deadline meant failed grand openings and the loss of major revenue streams.

“If you're in the St. Louis market, for example, with 30 stores and 15 are done but 15 are half-done, that is a brand loss,” says Al Rodgers, vice president of store design and construction for Dollar Tree Stores. “By unveiling a marketing

campaign for a St. Louis market, every single location needed to be ready for customers to walk in and have a pleasant experience of shopping in a new Deal\$ store. It's an all-or-nothing proposition,” continues Rodgers. “We didn't complete the acquisition to create a confused customer base due to a botched rollout. A flawless, seamless re-branding process was central to our business strategy.”

To add to the pressure of a quick turnaround needed to transform the look and feel of 120 stores spread across the Midwest, all the work needed to be done while the stores were still in operation. Closing any of the stores for even a day was not an available option.

THE APPROACH

The Dollar Tree team in charge of the Deal\$ reopening project recognized



The gift bag aisle in a re-branded Deal\$ store owned by Dollar Tree Stores. Before (top left) and after (above). Dollar Tree acquired the Deal\$ chain in 2006.



More “before and after” pictures of Dollar Tree’s re-branding efforts in a newly acquired Deal\$ location. All project rollouts were done while the stores were still in operation.

early on that streamlined and frequent communication between the key players was critical for a successful execution. A meeting was called 10 weeks before the grand opening deadline so that all the teams including the design, new graphics production, shipping, installation, merchandising and field rollout management could walk through their execution steps in detail. Each team would therefore have a better idea about the needs of other teams and would be able to identify the right sequencing of its tasks and recognize gaps in its process.

Project managers on each team also met in person and project-specific e-mail addresses and phone numbers were set up for the teams to communicate through. The fact that all the installation work was to be done overnight made it important that the teams be able to communicate with each other any time, day or night. Store staff would be scheduled for night work in advance and any delay due to an unanswered question from one of several overnight installation crews was to be avoided.

Everyone in retail construction and maintenance knows that two locations are seldom the same in terms of architectural detail and layout. In order to eliminate unanticipated glitches, the design team of Storeimage surveyed every store and prepared specific signage and graphics layout plans that fit each location’s

individual building features. A few pre-designed modifications were also prepared as options for the field crews in case the typical plan did not work exactly. This allowed the installation crews to continue their work without too many interruptions that could potentially affect other aspects of the project.

After the acquisition and store re-branding design were completed, TotalFacility came on board as the facilities contractor responsible for the project rollout. With a 3-week planning and contracting process, we had 3 more weeks left to achieve the new Dollar Tree “look” for the Deal\$ stores. The 120 stores located across Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Kansas and Illinois would each require several overnight crews to complete the work.

The tasks in order of implementation were:

1. Painting all the stores the new color scheme.
2. Upgrading electrical systems where needed for installation of new refrigerated drink cases and POS equipment.
3. Receive and schedule overnight crews to install pallets of new graphics packages and signage in each store.
4. Conduct field inspections and prepare punch lists to achieve 100% completion to everyone’s satisfaction.

Standard practice for projects with a

longer timeline is to train one or two crews and have them travel location-to-location to install the changes. This avoids reinventing the wheel in training and builds expertise among crews to handle recurring issues. With the time crunch of just 3 weeks, we didn’t have that luxury. Multiple crews in multiple states were needed simultaneously. This called for a more involved training process. And this, in turn, required a larger coordinating team dedicated to the project. We found an optimal number of seven to eight crews at a time in multiple states to work in this wide geographic area. The 120 stores were divided into two phases, tackling approximately half of the stores during each phase. Each installation team consisted of a crew of three technicians with one supervisor who would oversee the work in three to four locations simultaneously. It typically took the crew three overnights to complete the final graphics and signage installations.

In order to accelerate the training for the installation crews, double-sized crews of six members were formed for the first set of installations and then the trained crews were split and distributed among new crews to bring them up to speed quicker and shorten the learning curve.

LESSONS LEARNED

Certain key characteristics for this kind of project rise to the top, including:

- *Make sure you’ve got the right team of people in place.* If it’s “location, location, location” in real estate investing, in store construction and planning it’s got to be “people, people, people.” When you’re facing such a crunched process with a complex coordination schedule, there’s no room for anyone to be weak, or to pick up the pieces that some team members might drop. Everyone on the team should be at maximum work capacity. As soon as you sense one of the team members is not up to the task, you need to replace or re-assign them — without hesitation.
- *Subcontractors need to be held to the highest standards you’d set for your own employees.* This tight team approach also applies to the other subcontractors that are sending customized supplies to each location. If one link in the chain breaks, this ulti-

mately reflects on your company's ability to deliver on its promises.

- *Hands-on, continuous, high-quality communication needs to support the strong team.* At the outset of the project rollout, we set up a communications system so that the TotalFacility team could communicate 24/7 with our Dollar Tree team in the field, as well as with the subcontractors (e.g., Blackberries were supplied to

everyone on the teams, and special e-mail addresses set up for everyone on the project). Also, we made sure there was continuing communication and touching base before, during and after the work — this is what we mean by hands-on and continuous. Nothing is assumed when it comes to communications.

- *Implement a hub-spoke system for communication.* To avoid confusion among the various team members, the lead project man-

ager at Dollar Tree was assigned as the hub of activities, creating a more orderly flow of the communication.

- *The chain of command must be very clear.* Based on the realities of field conditions — which can be poles apart in different settings — it must be very clear who's in charge and how things can move most quickly. With clear, specific authority, no time is wasted. One experience we had: when a crew went to a store whose dimensions or structural features didn't match the typical design we had planned for, a quick decision on modifications needed to be made. Giving clear authority to one person allowed for qualified decisions on modifications to be made and the work didn't have to stop in order to make adjustments.

- *Anticipate challenges.* We tried to identify potential questions and issues in advance, since there was no time to wait around for responding to surprises once the projects got going.

While we use the latest in technology (e.g., for tracking project progress and for communicating with our team), it's the basics — like strong organization and great people dedicated to executing an outstanding job — that make the process of a complex project rollout in a very short timeframe a feasible proposition. These important lessons and modern innovations take us back to the basics: Jack be nimble, Jack be quick... **PRSM**

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