

Markets for Plumbing Services

Module 2 of 5

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of this module, you will be able to:

- 1. Identify approaches that can be used to recognize and understand markets for plumbing services.
- 2. Incorporate primary and secondary market research techniques into the decision-making process.
- 3. List possible target markets for plumbing services within and outside the traditional HVACR business.
- 4. Determine how potential target markets fit with three possible service levels.
- 5. Identify markets for plumbing services that should be avoided.



he Mechanical Service Contractors of America (MSCA) produced this module on "Markets for Plumbing Services." The module provides a closer look at the type of research that is needed before making a final business decision along with presenting ten specific target markets that create possibilities for the HVACR contractor looking to add plumbing services. It is the second of five (5) Plumbing Service 101 modules designed to review all aspects of adding plumbing service to an existing HVACR service operation, including ways plumbing service can complement an existing business, recognizing and understanding markets for plumbing services, identifying possible recruiting sources for finding quality service plumbers, identifying costs and expenses associated with the start up of a new plumbing service division, and highlighting a workable organizational structure and key roles needed to create a successful plumbing service operation.

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IMPORTANT

MSCA provides member contractors with management and marketing skills, training and educational programs, and government and labor relations.

The modules are designed to include fundamental industry concepts, presented in a thorough, real-world way that will help you to better understand the plumbing service business.

MSCA PLUMBING SERVICE 101 MODULES

- #1 Plumbing Service Business Basics
- #4 Financial Tools and Profitability
- #2 Markets for Plumbing Services
- #5 Operations
- #3 Finding and Developing Great Plumbing Technicians

INTRODUCTION

The first module in the Plumbing Service 101 series, "Plumbing Service Business Basics," introduced the concept of expanding an HVACR business, both vertically and horizontally, with the decision to add a range of plumbing



services. This module will cover how companies can answer important questions and acquire information needed to evaluate this opportunity in relation to their unique business situations.

The appeal of adding plumbing services is the recognition that these services are needed alongside HVACR

in most installations. Plumbing services share many common characteristics with HVACR from the viewpoint of potential customers. This is a powerful perception, even though significantly different skill sets are required to perform plumbing and HVACR services.

HVACR and plumbing services are widely needed for maintenance, update, and new construction in virtually all residential, commercial, and industrial facilities. Both are critical for efficient processes, safety, and the environmental comfort of workers and building occupants.

Furthermore, while they are technically in the domain of the plumbing field, the piping and controls for gas, liquid, and waste flows are usually a critical component of HVACR installations, making plumbing and related services integral to and closely associated with most HVACR systems and facilities.

When looking for reliable plumbing service providers, customers often find a limited number of choices for contractors capable of meeting their high standards. This is because the plumbing industry is quite fragmented, consisting of many small and sole-proprietor businesses with limited capabilities and widely varying quality standards. Additionally, many non-union plumbers on the commercial side are commissioned plumbers.

For commercial and industrial customers with critical needs, the option of a single-source vendor that can provide both HVACR and plumbing services is very attractive as an alternative to existing suppliers, especially if the plumbing is performed with high service standards, competent staff, and assured reliability.

These factors create a compelling rationale for many HVACR companies to provide both types of services in their product line up, giving them the opportunity to increase revenue and expand into complementary, but untapped, markets. However, it will require some serious research before making a commitment.

MARKET RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

Market research is a range of processes for acquiring critical information about a business area and its associated target markets. The main role of market research is to provide a company with an in-depth view of the relevant markets, customers, competition, and business environment in order to meet customer needs in ways that can be profitable and provide differentiation over other competitors.

You may think that you already understand your customers adequately and don't need to conduct further research before starting up a new service offering. But in fast-changing environments, failing to do proper research can easily result in targeting the wrong markets or missing a critical customer need, resulting in a failed or disappointing business result. Companies that are most



Research conducted by IBIS-World, a leading market research firm, indicates that the plumbing industry was \$95 billion strong as of 2013. In 2019, that number shot up to more than \$110 billion, and it is expected to continue growing.

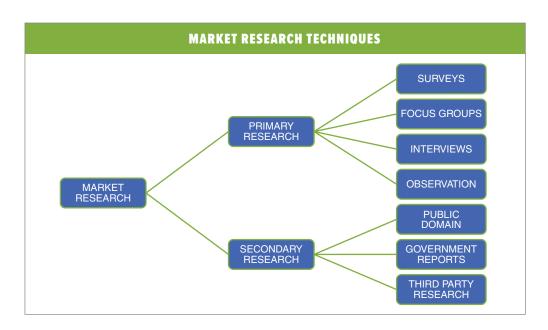


IMPORTANT

Market research is a vital part of any business strategy; it provides answers companies need when making strategic decisions. successful are the ones that do thorough market research before jumping into a new marketplace. Primary and secondary research are two methods that can assist your evaluation.

Primary research is information directly obtained from and specific to potential customers and target markets. It is first-hand research that is developed by you or by others for you. Talking directly with your existing and potential customers to acquire information about their needs for a new service is a form of primary research. Undertaking a primary research campaign is a way to leverage existing customer relationships. Because the usual method of conducting this type of research is through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations by field technicians, it can provide opportunities for additional customer "touch points" beyond the normal sales and service activities.

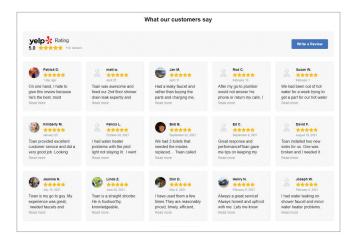
Secondary research is more general research covering an industry or broad market area. It involves gathering statistics, reports, studies, and other data usually already existing from sources such as third-party research companies, government agencies, trade associations, libraries, and even your local chamber of commerce. This information may be free or in the public domain, but it is more often available for purchase directly from various research groups.



It is likely that information from some combination of these two methods will be most useful for your business planning. Regardless of how it is accomplished, the goal of market research is to increase knowledge about markets and customers so you can best address customer needs with successful business strategies.

CONDUCTING A PRIMARY RESEARCH CAMPAIGN

Surveys are the most widely used method for both product and service market research. Surveys come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, from the little "tell us how we are doing" survey card on the table at your local restaurant to the ubiquitous satisfaction survey you may already be using to follow up on customer satisfaction after a service call. And almost everyone has received a short follow up web satisfaction survey the day after receiving an Amazon purchase, almost always before you have had an opportunity to open the package.



Surveys make a lot of sense when you already know the specific topics you want to explore. They are a very quick and cost-effective way to get quantitative, or check box, responses from a larger audience which would be impractical or costly to reach through other methods. They can provide a snapshot of your sales potential, target market, and customer base by asking questions such as the following:

- What is your satisfaction level with your current plumbing provider?
- What is your annual budget range for plumbing expenditures?
- How interested are you in changing plumbing vendors?
- What specific types of plumbing services do you need?

In today's technology-driven environment, it is easy to create and execute online surveys that customers can take from laptops or mobile devices. Using an online survey provider such as **surveymonkey.com** or **surveymethods.com** can be a good starting point.

Focus groups are a variant of the interview method involving discussion with a group of selected people. The sample group usually contains potential customers, people with specific experience in target markets, or experts on the specific topic of interest. When conducting a focus group, it is usually preferable to have it run by a moderator not known by the focus group participants. It is the moderator's responsibility to guide the discussion and encourage interaction to promote a more active, deeper discussion that reveals valid opinions and information.







Trade associations, such as BOMA and IFMA, can be effective sources for focus group participants.

Focus groups are excellent for free-form qualitative research, when you are looking for a lot of relevant information, but don't yet know what important questions to ask. The focus group might be used in conjunction with a wider audience survey, using the focus group feedback to develop the key topics of interest for the actual survey. Focus groups can also be used to follow up on the survey results, to elaborate on results, or get clarification and opinions about reasons behind some of the survey responses.

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Direct interviews are a widely used and valuable primary research method. They are most useful for in-depth research that can uncover subtle key issues relating to customer opinions. Since your primary focus when adding plumbing services is your existing HVACR customer base, direct interviews should certainly be one of your main research methods. Taking advantage of existing customer relationships to interview potential plumbing services users from a representative sample of your HVACR customer base is advantageous.



IMPORTANT

Most often, customers are happy to volunteer information when contacted personally and made to feel their response is important to the growth of your company.

Direct interviews should not be used until other research has been completed because interviews with valued customers can be targeted and more efficient if you are already knowledgeable about the plumbing services area. Also, you want to avoid wasting a client's time or giving the impression that you are not already knowledgeable about the plumbing services area.

Interviews can take a variety of forms, from free-flowing conversations to highly structured discussions following a checklist of specific questions. Any format will work depending on the goal.

You may want to have your salespeople, customer service representatives, or dispatchers conduct the interviews with selected customers, if appropriate. Relying on close relationships with the client can make for the right setting for a free exchange of information. An alternative is to use a technically knowledgeable consultant or professional researcher who can still interact with the customer but discuss issues more freely as an impartial information gatherer who is outside the existing business relationship.

Direct interviews can provide deep insights about services, customer problems, pricing issues, competition, and even psychological buying motivations and underlying customer perceptions of service providers. In addition, engaging potential customers by seeking advice early in your planning cycle helps make them feel that they are a valued contributor to your business, which makes them more likely to support your plumbing services business with future contracts.

Observation is one of the easiest methods of acquiring primary research for plumbing services. Any company representative who is on-site is a candidate for becoming an instantaneous researcher. Salespeople who are calling on potential or existing customers should also be asking and looking for plumbing opportunities. It's easy to walk into a restroom to look for the following things:

- · ADA compliance
- · High-efficiency toilets
- Urinal flush valves or waterless urinals

SECONDARY RESEARCH REPORTS

- Pressure regulators
- · Low-flow plumbing fixtures
- · Aerators for faucets
- Sewer odor

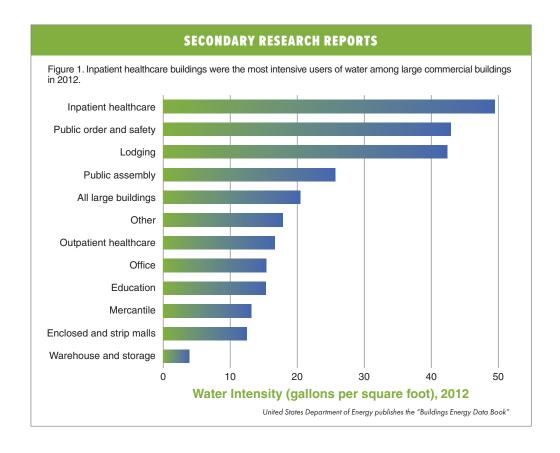
Research reports gleaned from secondary research sources can be valuable, even though they are often too broad or generic in nature to provide all the details you may need. Regardless, it is useful to take advantage of available secondary research sources to provide a more complete industry and market overview. It is a way of complementing and validating your primary research methods.



! IMPORTANT

Make sure to collect data from authentic sources. Incorrect data can severely hamper research and lead to wrong results. A quick Google search will show many research companies selling relatively expensive reports that may or may not be worthwhile for your purposes. Also, there are many sources of public domain or free information that may prove useful. It is worthwhile to check with your local library resource desk, industry trade groups, and state or federal government data sources.

You can use the federal government website **www.USA.gov** to search for and find federal, state, and local government data sources on a variety of industries and topics. For example, the United States Department of Energy publishes the "Buildings Energy Data Book." It contains useful information such as the following chart showing which target markets have the highest levels of water usage in various commercial facilities, suggesting a higher potential need for plumbing services in these markets.



In addition, your local college or university school of business may have relevant research available. If you have an existing relationship with a local college or university, you may want to consider partnering with them on a class research project.

OPPORTUNITIES AND TARGET MARKETS

The opportunities available for plumbing services can extend across a variety of available markets in your service area. This may include a wide range of commercial and industrial targets such as utilities, manufacturing, mining, hospital, pharmaceutical, hotel, casino, government, and education. Potential plumbing target markets are outlined below.

OPPORTUNITIES AND TARGET MARKETS Institutional/ Medical **Public Safety** Retail Government Inpatient hospitals Shopping mall Outpatient/Diagnostic Military facilities Strip mall Biomed • Stand-alone store Jail Rehab centers Prison Sole practice Library Restaurant Recreation Lodging Fast food Casino Hotel Stadium • Chain sit-down Motel Independent restaurants Theater Multi-unit family Food courts Fitness center • HUD-managed multi-unit family Amusement parks • High-rise residential Industrial/ **Education** Office Manufacturing • Public • Under 200,000 sq.ft. Food processing • Over 200,000 sq.ft. Private Pharmaceuticals Colleges • Product-specific Technical and vocational Warehouse Company-specific Self-storage

The list above may include markets you currently serve as well as other potential markets outside your current HVACR customer base. It is important to stress that it is recommended to begin by first prioritizing existing customers before addressing other potential targets beyond your current customers. Later, after you are able to provide the level of services desired by your current customers, other attractive target markets identified through market research can also be addressed.

The real key is to find a match between the investment you want to make, the labor available to service the desired market, and experience in the market you are trying to penetrate. The "Target Market Revenue and Services Chart" contained in the Appendix provides information about the markets listed below.

- 1. Medical
- 2. Institutional/Public Safety
- 3. Retail
- 4. Restaurant
- 5. Recreation
- 6. Lodging
- 7. Education
- 8. Office
- 9. Industrial/Manufacturing
- 10. Warehouse

For each market, the information outlines revenue potential and level of needs for three service levels: minimal, typical, and full or specialized.

MARKETS TO BE AVOIDED

Most of the time, we are looking for ways to find additional customers and markets, but there are definitely customers you may want to identify and specifically avoid. Effective market research can flag those business areas and customers where there is a poor fit with your business objectives and potential inability to adequately meet those customer needs.

The reasons to avoid some customers can be varied and will be highly dependent on your own situation and strategy. As a new provider of plumbing services, you will probably want to avoid markets that present the following:

- · High litigation hazard
- Unreasonably demanding performance requirements
- High risk environments
- Marginal business practices
- Extreme work conditions or hazardous environments
- Critical requirements where service failures could have severe and irreversible consequence.

Moreover, you don't want to target a market for which you do not have the requisite technician skills or availability, such as businesses requiring 24/7

fast response service. If you are only staffed for a normal work schedule, this is certainly an unattainable requirement.

The small restaurant market should be carefully considered. A superficial look at small restaurants may seem attractive, but they usually have limited plumbing needs. There are larger restaurants with sophisticated commercial

kitchens and multi-user bathroom facilities which provide more intense plumbing service needs. However, restaurants in general pose significant risks that need to be carefully addressed in order to be successful in that market.

Moreover, be aware of varied problems which may arise in high-rise residential buildings. Homeowners' associations will generally approve work on the central equipment, which can be a low-risk service. However, units for individual homeowners should be avoided. With individual equipment failures and related problems, there is a high likelihood of the water traveling from one unit to another in multiple residences. Before you know it, you are putting homeowners up in hotels, replacing expensive flooring and wall coverings, and reimbursing for dry cleaning and any other expenses the customer feels is the responsibility of the contractor.

As a guideline, any target market where you are only able to meet a limited portion of the customer needs is probably something you will not want to take on to minimize customer disappointment and service failures. While these are only general examples, your market research and SWOT analysis (See Module 1 for details) can help you better identify those markets and customers that should be avoided for your specific business needs.





CHALLENGES IMPACTING MARKET SUCCESS

Every market requires some level of plumbing service. Even in a slow economy, if they aren't constructing buildings, there are, at a minimum, maintenance and/or service needs. Leaks need to be fixed, drains need to be cleaned, and backflows need to be tested. This is what makes plumbing service attractive. However, there are definite challenges the HVACR contractor needs to be

aware of before fully committing to adding plumbing to the menu of service offerings. They include the following:

- 1. Finding plumbing technicians will always be one of the greatest challenges for the contractor. Equally difficult is finding a plumbing salesperson. An effective plumbing salesperson really needs to know the business and the marketplace to sell it. As a result, it is difficult to train someone right out of school to do plumbing sales.
- 2. To provide 24-hour emergency services, a high level of commitment is needed from all of your staff. The real challenge is to avoid burnout of employees by giving them ample time to rest.
- 3. Getting plumbers the right training for the market you are entering is a significant



challenge. Today's plumbers need to understand electronic controls, gas pressures, and troubleshooting sophisticated appliances. Getting the type of extensive training required for current products is very difficult. Without the right trained personnel in place, success may be elusive in some markets.

SUMMARY

The attractive markets and customer growth potential for plumbing services provide significant opportunities for HVACR companies to dramatically expand their businesses and profitability. Adding plumbing services can provide extraordinary value for their customers by providing a reliable, high-quality, single-source provider for both HVACR and plumbing services, where none existed before.

A proper and thorough market research effort will help identify the highest potential market segments to target and identify the unique needs of customers in those markets. This effort will result in a company being better prepared to address and exceed their customers' requirements. The objective is to configure and staff the new service to stand out from competitors and assure success.

This module covered how to identify potential plumbing service markets and research methods. It follows Module 1, which covered the basics of adding plumbing services to an existing HVACR company. Modules 3 through 5 are designed to expand your understating in the areas of finding and developing plumbing technicians, establishing financial tools for profitability, and implementing plumbing operations

TARGET MARKET REVENUE AND SERVICE REQUIREMENTS CHART					
MARKET AND	SERVICE TYPE NEEDED				
REVENUE POTENTIAL	MINIMAL	TYPICAL	FULL OR SPECIALIZED		
MEDICAL High	Plumbing fixture repair Bedpan washers, flushing rim sinks Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning ADA fixture install and repair	Minimal, plus the following: Thermostatic mixing valve setup and repair Circulating systems and pumps Video inspections Jetting Acid neutralization tank Planned maintenance	Typical, plus the following: RO and DI water systems Ejector pump install and service Sewage and storm pit pump and clean Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance Storm water harvesting system maintenance Hot water and cold water cross connection troubleshooting Booster pump systems Medical gas install and repair		
INSTITUTIONAL/ PUBLIC SAFETY High	Plumbing fixture repair Specialty plumbing fixtures, such as one-piece WC/lava combo, gang shower Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning	Minimal, plus the following: Thermostatic mixing valve setup and repair Circulating systems and pumps Video inspections Jetting Planned maintenance Grease trap maintenance Multiple temperature hot water systems	Typical, plus the following: • Hot water and cold water cross connection troubleshooting • Ejector pump install and service • Sewage and storm pit pump and clean • Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance • Storm water harvesting system maintenance • Water audits • Booster pump systems • Kitchen special equipment, such as sprayer units, dump lever waste		

MARKET AND REVENUE POTENTIAL	SERVICE TYPE NEEDED			
	MINIMAL	TYPICAL	FULL OR SPECIALIZED	
RETAIL Low	Plumbing fixture repair Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning	Minimal, plus the following: • Video inspections • Jetting • Planned maintenance	Typical, plus the following: • Ejector pump install and service • Sewage and storm pit pump and clean • Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance • Storm water harvesting system maintenance • Vacuum-operated waste systems	
RESTAURANT High	Plumbing fixture repair Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning	Minimal, plus the following: • Video inspections • Jetting • Planned maintenance • Grease trap maintenance • Gas piping • Multiple temperature • Hot water systems	Typical, plus the following: • Ejector pump install and service • Sewage and storm pit pump and clean • Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance • Storm water harvesting system maintenance • Booster heater for hot water • Kitchen specialty equipment, such as sprayer units, dump lever waste, glass fillers, water filters	
RECREATION Low (It is often seasonal)	Plumbing fixture repair Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning	Minimal, plus the following: • Electric eye faucets, flush valves • Shower rooms • Thermostatic mixing valve setup and repair • Video inspections • Jetting • Planned maintenance • Grease trap maintenance	Typical, plus the following: • Ejector pump install and service • Sewage and storm pit pump and clean • Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance • Storm water harvesting system maintenance • Water conditioning systems	

MARKET AND REVENUE POTENTIAL		SERVICE TYPE NEEDED			
	MINIMAL	TYPICAL	FULL OR SPECIALIZED		
LODGING High	Plumbing fixture repair Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning	Minimal, plus the following: • Video inspections • Jetting • Planned maintenance • Thermostatic mixing valve setup and repair • Thermostatic and/or pressure balance shower valves	Typical, plus the following: • Ejector pump install and service • Sewage and storm pit pump and clean • Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance • Storm water harvesting system maintenance • Hot water and cold water cross connection troubleshooting • Decorative fountain service and repair		
EDUCATION High	Plumbing fixture repair Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning	Minimal, plus the following: • Video inspections • Jetting • Planned maintenance • Grease trap maintenance	Water conditioning systems Circulating systems and pumps Typical, plus the following: Ejector pump install and service Sewage and storm pit pump and clean Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance Storm water harvesting system maintenance Water audits		
OFFICE Medium	Plumbing fixture repair Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning	Minimal, plus the following: • Video inspections • Jetting • Planned maintenance	Typical, plus the following: • Ejector pump install and service • Sewage and storm pit pump and clean • Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance • Storm water harvesting system maintenance • Booster pump systems • Water audits		

MARKET AND	SERVICE TYPE NEEDED		
REVENUE POTENTIAL	MINIMAL	TYPICAL	FULL OR SPECIALIZED
INDUSTRIAL/ MANUFACTURING High	Plumbing fixture repair Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning	Minimal, plus the following: • Video inspections • Jetting • Planned maintenance	Typical, plus the following: • Ejector pump install and service • Sewage and storm pit pump and clean • Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance • Storm water harvesting system maintenance • Solenoid valves • Circulating systems and pumps • Water conditioning systems • Lab gases, acid waste
WAREHOUSE Low	 Plumbing fixture repair Water heater service Backflow Piping repair Drain cleaning 	Minimal, plus the following: • Video inspections • Jetting • Planned maintenance	Typical, plus the following: • Ejector pump install and service • Sewage and storm pit pump and clean • Storm water retention and filtering system maintenance • Storm water harvesting system maintenance