



# ***Traveling New Roads***

*As COVID-19 rages on, the parking industry embraces new technology and takes on new roles to protect its community and boost business.*

By Ken Lovegreen



**DEVON MIX**, president and co-owner of Nevada Premier Valet & Detail, was parking cars at record numbers in March, but business came to a screeching halt the last week of the month. Like most operators across the US, this one saw its valet business evaporate almost overnight. An accountant suggested that Mix lay off 90 percent of his workforce in April, but he disagreed. Instead, Mix and business partner Mike Foster did exactly the opposite: They added car detailing to expand services, advertising it first to existing clients. Now, detailing brings in almost as much revenue as valet parking.

“It’s absolutely necessary to give customers a contactless payment platform to pay for parking and implement cleaning protocols like disinfecting cars,” says Mix. “But to really survive this pandemic’s disruption and recoup that lost summer revenue, you have to diversify your business—even if it means spending more money.”

Mix doubled down on that radical move by investing in parking improvements on some of his small surface lots while the pandemic raged on. These lots used to offer free parking, but Mix repaved them, did some landscaping, bought new trash cans, and monetized them. He didn’t want to invest in expensive parking payment equipment on 20-space lots or make parkers download an app to pay for parking. After some research, he opted for a contactless platform that only required installing a couple of signs instructing parkers how to pay.



“We tagged every space with the name of the platform, and people used their smartphones to pay online. Customers were annoyed having to pay for parking at all, but they quickly got used to it and found the process really simple,” he says. “I wouldn’t call myself on the cutting edge of technology, though. I think you have to use parking payment technology to be competitive, especially now.”

### **Ambassadors, Not Car Parkers**

Corinthian Parking and Transportation was a valet parking operator for healthcare facilities before COVID-19; now they’re hospital ambassadors, too. At some hospitals, such as Palo Alto Medical Foundation locations and Bay Area El Camino Hospital, valets screen patients through closed car windows. The valet attendants ask qualifying questions using a printed flip chart and drivers give a thumbs up or down as answers, allowing attendants to direct them to the proper parking section without risking exposing hospital staff or other visitors to new coronavirus infections.

“Early in the pandemic, our valet attendants were couriers for lab tests and other needs at hospitals when regular services were overwhelmed,” says Kyle

Baldasano, regional director at Corinthian Parking and Transportation. “We continue to assist our healthcare clients with protocols developed to reduce exposure, not just for COVID-19 but also in preparation for the upcoming flu season.”

For hospitals that created outdoor mobile tents to manage incoming patients for COVID-19 or flu testing, Corinthian manages the queue of visitors, directing traffic to the right parking lots after screening each patient to ensure sick people get where they need to go quickly and with as little interaction with other hospital staff and patients as possible.

Outdoor screening is expected to greatly reduce interaction with staff inside, and some hospitals also use valets as entry screeners. In the lobby at some facilities, Corinthian screens incoming visitors at the information desk. These areas are typically manned by elderly volunteers in a higher risk category for COVID-19, so the valet team stepped in and assisted by taking temperatures, completing the qualifying process, and giving a sticker to every visi-

tor, patient, or staff member so that security knew they were cleared in the lobby. As part of new cleaning best practices at healthcare facilities, valet attendants wipe down wheelchairs before and after use, often managing

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wheelchair corrals for some locations in addition to valet parking.

The team also participates in outreach donation programs at Kaiser in Santa Clara, Calif., handing out lunches to families. “If a hospital has a screening or outreach program, developed new cleaning protocols, or needs traffic control, we want to help,” says Baldasano. “We’re partnering with our customers in other ways now that are an extension of a hospital’s patient satisfaction team. We share a common goal of reducing disease exposure overall, but we also want to make sure they also have trained people on hand to support their community service outreach programs that are so vital during difficult times.”

## Mobile Service

Just like the parking and healthcare industries, the pandemic moved like a tsunami through hospitality. Online ordering and service platforms offering touchless, cashless payment were once an added convenience at restaurants, hotels, country clubs, golf courses, and stadiums looking to boost customer experiences. Now they’re a customer-driven requirement to increase revenue from food and beverage (F&B) sales.

Golf courses were some of the first businesses to reopen in June. While the daily fee helps keep lights on, much of any club’s revenue comes from leagues, outings, and members using club amenities. F&B is one of the most popular member amenities of a club, and it has slim profit margins. Some country clubs in Pennsylvania and Maryland moved to cashless, touchless technology so golfers wouldn’t have to go into a building or talk to a staff member to order F&B or merchandise; they order and pay for items at hole four using their cell phones, and staff delivers those orders at the turn.

Repeat business is the lifeblood for retailers whose businesses are built on personal interaction with customers in stores, so they’re one of the last business types to fully embrace using contactless technology. Before the pandemic, many retailers depended on legacy point-of-sale systems and felt moving to contactless processes would negatively affect customer experiences. But after it—just like in parking—there’s overwhelming evidence that customers want in-store contactless experiences or they’ll take their business online.

## Valets Start Shopping

Depending on the contactless platform they choose to manage parking payments, valet businesses at malls



can add hands-free shopping to their offering. Participating retailers allow shoppers to buy items at each store, then text the valet to pick up and store the bags while they shop. When they’re ready to leave, they just text a request that the car be brought to whatever stand nearby. Offering that service increases peace of mind, as payment transactions and all communication are contactless. Shoppers don’t have to lug around heavy purchases, encouraging them to shop longer. And they have two-way communication, so shoppers can request cars be brought to another valet stand instead of walking back through the mall, decreasing how much contact they have with other people.

Avoiding exposure to COVID-19 is a reason a lot of people stay home, so offering contactless experiences along with increased protective measures gives customers added peace of mind during the pandemic. Going touchless and instilling social distancing best practices right now is smart. But diversifying business, conducting necessary repairs or updates, expanding services, and moving to contactless payments platforms will boost business revenue even during shutdowns of non-essential businesses as we flatten the COVID-19 curve together. ♦



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