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# Salting 101

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By Rick Kier, CSP, CLP, CNP



**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The advice contained within this article comes from my years of performing salting services in Syracuse, NY, where we routinely receive 140 in. of snow annually. In addition, my involvement with SIMA has helped me learn from the best in the industry. As an expert witness in multiple slip-and-fall lawsuits, I have seen the ramifications of salting from both sides.

For simplicity's sake, "salt-ing" will refer to any product or application method.

Whether you are already provide salting services or you are thinking about starting, it is important to establish best practices that will guide your company and help to protect it should you ever be faced with a lawsuit. Following are some best practices to consider:

### Liability

Being in the salting business means taking on additional liability, so think long and hard about shouldering that responsibility. If you offer parking lot salting or sidewalk deicing services to your clients, you very likely will be named as a responsible party if anyone slips and falls on that property during the winter. You must set up your service in a manner that protects the public, your customer and yourself.

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[Brian Birch](#) wrote on [Robert Smart's Walls](#) - 12:58 PM

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Of course, the best course of action is to make sure no one falls, but this is easier said than done. Most customers are not willing to pay for unlimited services. They want you to make sure no one falls—but only on the budget with which they are comfortable.

It is imperative that you have a written contract that clearly spells out your responsibilities. Some customers (especially larger ones) provide their own contracts, and we don't get to write the language. In some cases, you can educate the customer and negotiate to modify the contract; in others, you have to decide whether signing their contract as written is worth the risk to your company.

Issues to consider when establishing salting service contracts include:

- 
- Do you perform only when the customer calls you?
- Will it be your job to decide to salt?

These details make a huge difference not only in deeming who is responsible, but also how much work you must be prepared to do.

### Scouting for ice

If you accept the responsibility of deciding when to salt, you will be creating a whole new task of scouting the pavement for the conditions that will trigger your services. How will you get paid for this scouting? This is where good pricing comes into play.

Regardless of whether you charge by the event, the bag, the ton or the season, your price needs to include the cost of scouting. Some contractors charge a separate "Ice Patrol" fee. In our area, we might scout for icy conditions 80 to 100 times, but our best salting customers might receive service only 40 to 60 times. We spend a lot of time looking for icy conditions, and we don't always end up salting.

Our company uses a scouting checklist to ensure we have diligently assessed the site. By using the checklist, we control in what order the jobs are visited and allow them to be salted by the corresponding time deadline. Our checklist also shows us to which level of service each customer has agreed. We document the site conditions, as well as the date and time of the inspection—especially when the job does not require salting—to show that we were there and checked for slippery conditions. If a slip and fall occurs, you may not be notified until two or three months after the fact. Saving this documentation can be critical in protecting your-self and your customer.

Even when we scout all night and don't put down an ounce of salt, we are providing a valuable service. Don't underestimate this value. Charge enough to not only cover your costs, but also to cover the huge liability that comes with the job (as well as make a reasonable profit).

### To salt, or not to salt

Knowing when to salt is not as black and white as knowing when to plow. In fact, making the decision to salt is the hardest part of being in the salting business. Decide to salt when it is not needed or desired, and you waste labor, product and money. Wait too long to start, and you risk someone falling and getting injured.

I recommend that you set up standards to act as triggers for when salting should take place. Not all customers are looking for the same level of service. Some want salting done as a precaution, while others may not want you to salt unless the parking lot is covered with glare ice. There are several levels in-between these two extremes. At Pro Scapes, for example, we have five levels of service from which our customers can choose.

Most contractors plow the sites for which they provide salt services. Sometimes there can be a void between what the plowing contract calls for and what is required in the salting agreement.



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For example, perhaps a job has a 3-in. trigger depth on the snow plowing contract. If you had only a ¼-in. of snow, you might choose to instead melt it with salt. The plan works well, and the only things left behind are bare pavement and a happy customer. Now, let's say the same job gets 1½-in. of snow. It is not enough to meet the trigger depth of the plowing contract, but it's too much snow to simply melt away with salt. At Pro Scapes, we plow the snow away so we can do our salting job well. If we don't, then we can't clear the pavement, and we aren't creating happy customers and safe sites. We won't be paid any more for the plowing, but we believe it's a necessary cost to being in the salting business.

### Document everything

We protect ourselves by documenting every aspect of the salting service: time the site was inspected; time plowing began and was completed; time salting was started and completed; how much salt was applied; who did the work; and the weather conditions when work was completed (was it still snowing, for example).

### Accuracy in pricing

Many contractors charge their clients by the ton for rock salt. At Pro Scapes, we don't invoice by the ton. We don't have scales on our trucks, so we don't believe we should send out invoices that say we put down X number of tons. Instead, we charge by the "unit." Our loader has a 1-cu. yd. bucket, so the driver knows exactly how many 1-cu. yd. units he has loaded into his truck—and can accurately document how many units have been applied at the customer's site.

### Wrapping up service

At the end of the salting season, take the extra time to properly clean and neutralize the equipment before placing it in storage. Several products are available that can help with this task. Like other tools, the more you spend, the better your equipment will be. The more time you spend cleaning your equipment in the spring, the better shape it will be in next fall when you prepare for winter.

The salting business can be a rewarding part of any snow removal operation. You can get great satisfaction knowing that you kept your customers' sites clean and safe all winter. If you do your homework and be proactive, you can reduce many of the risks involved with salting—while bringing new profit to your company.

### PRE-SEASON CHECKLIST

The salting business requires a lot of advance planning. Long before the season begins, there are several things you need to do to en-sure your operations run smoothly:

1. Sell services to your customers and get signed contracts
2. Decide the type of deicing materials you will use (granular, liquid, etc.)
3. Allocate a material storage area
4. Set up loading equipment and procedures
5. Purchase adequate volumes of the materials you choose (based on your signed contracts)
6. Set re-order levels and procedures
7. Purchase application equipment
8. Install application equipment
9. Lay out routes for salt trucks
10. Train salt truck drivers
11. Set up a salting scouting plan
12. Determine start times

Rick's final take-home points:

- Not visiting the job site to check conditions. It is far too easy to assume conditions are acceptable at some or all of your job sites just because your driveway is clear. You must have reliable monitoring at all times.
- Putting too much salt down. Study the recommended rates for the products you use, and

monitor the results you get at various application rates. Unskilled applicators tend to use too much product. This wastes money and negatively affects the environment.

- Leaving piles of salt in the parking lot. This can happen from over-applying, if the truck is overloaded with salt and it spills off going around corners, or if the salt spreader isn't adjusted properly. Regardless of how it occurs, it is unsightly, unprofessional and can create a hazard.
- Overloading the salt truck. Most ¾-ton and 1-ton trucks will fit much larger salt spreaders than they can legally carry. Fully loaded, the spreaders fit too much salt for the weight capacity of the vehicles. One cubic yard of rock salt weighs about one ton (dry weight). In other words, a 2-yd. salt spreader on a ¾-ton truck is a recipe for an overload ticket. Worse than getting a ticket: If that truck is involved in an accident when it is overloaded, you can be held liable.
- Missing areas of the parking lot or walking areas. In the event of an accident, your level of responsibility will be based on you being able to prove you did your job to the level of "common industry standards." If you missed paved areas, you will be held liable.
- Damaging cars with salt spreaders. Driving next to a parked car with your salt spreader blasting at high speed is a surefire way to cause damage to the car's paint. Slow the spinner and stay far away from parked cars.
- Trying to salt away too much snow. Salt can melt through minor accumulations of snow. If it is too cold or the snow is too deep, you are wasting salt.
- Charging for too much salt. Some contractors don't know how to gauge salt use. Others overcharge on purpose to make more money and take advantage of customers. Neither is acceptable. Track what you use, and be honest.
- Not charging for all the salt used. Failure to track your salt usage can lead to shortchanging yourself. Track how much salt you buy, sell and have left over. Check many times during the season to make sure you are accurate.
- Failing to document. Documentation is your proof that you did your work. The paperwork will protect you in case of an accident, as well as help you invoice.
- Failing to perform the work required. Your salting contract should spell out your responsibilities. It is up to you to fulfill your end of the bargain. Failure to do so can bring a variety of penalties—from losing the account to being sued.

Best practices can help solidify your operations while reducing slip-and-fall potential

*Rick Kier is president of Pro Scapes Inc. in Jamesville, NY, and a member of the Snow Business Editorial Advisory Board. Contact him at [rick@proscapes.com](mailto:rick@proscapes.com)*

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**Monday, 09 August 2010 10:47** | posted by [Daniel Dubuc](#) [Comment Link](#)

Great article, I am from Montreal, do you have average of the number of square foot a ton of salt could cover in normal condition. If you apply in a big parking lot for example.

Thank you.

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