

# Preparing for the Future of Parking

By Matt Andrews

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COVID-19 turned the parking industry on its head overnight. From airports to urban centers, thousands of garages and lots are nearly empty or completely closed. Shuttle services are suspended or reduced. And parking operators are wondering how to prepare for the future when there's no real precedent for the situation we're facing. But it won't be like this forever. Restaurants and retail shops will reopen. Employees will return to work. Schools will resume in-person classes. Parking operators who prepare for the future will be best positioned to make customers feel safe and recover at least some lost revenue.

## Adapting to the Cultural Shift

COVID-19 has changed our perspectives and our behaviors. We're all more aware of our surroundings and the people in them. While customers may not spend much time in the lot or garage, there are areas where they may congregate, such as elevators, pay machines, and valet pickups. Traditionally, we haven't had to give much thought to the amount of space in these areas, but in the wake of coronavirus, that will change.

Customers may be hesitant to get into a crowded elevator or to stand on a crowded curb waiting for valet pickup. Without proper space to distance, they may spill into driving lanes or parking spaces, increasing the likelihood of accidents. Be prepared to accommodate social distancing by marking off areas where they can safely stand, even if that means cutting into spaces. Examine all the enclosed areas in the lot or garage. Some spaces, such as elevator vestibules, also don't leave much room for distancing. For these areas, work with engineering professionals to find ways to create positive air flow.

## Preparing for Higher Utilization of Parking Facilities in the Short-Term

Ridesharing has declined by up to 60-70%, and may not fully return to pre-COVID-19 levels. In the short-term, commuters who have their own vehicles will likely opt to drive instead of using ridesharing or public transit options. This can result in higher utilization of parking facilities in the immediate future. In the long-term, commuters may grow comfortable with using ridesharing, ride-hailing and public transportation again, but parking operators should brace for higher-than-usual utilization of their facilities in the short-term.

## Shuttles and Valets Raise Questions

To say that COVID-19 has parking operators thinking on their toes is an understatement. But shuttle services and valet operations will likely be where adaptability is needed most. There are serious questions about how to address shuttle and valet services moving forward, and there's no one-size-fits-all approach that can address the needs of each facility.

What we know for sure is that shuttle drivers and valets need personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect themselves and customers from potential infection. To align with the cultural shift around hygiene, parking operators and facility managers will need to make accommodations for self parking in facilities that normally only offer valet services.

Addressing shuttles will be more challenging still, since service may still be required, despite lower utilization. Shuttle operators will need to closely examine usage rates and customer behaviors to develop an operating schedule that makes sense in terms of customer needs and costs.

## Cleaning Takes Center Stage

Traditionally, parking facility cleaning happens in the background, with schedules arranged to be as unobtrusive as possible. As facilities reopen, customers will be looking for visible signs that disinfection is taken seriously. That could look like a number of things: more frequent cleaning during business hours, hand sanitizer near high touch points, and more trash cans where gloves and masks can be safely discarded.

Of course, visibility isn't as important as the actual effectiveness of a cleaning program. In most parking facilities, cleanliness is centered around aesthetics and preservation of the infrastructure. But parking operators need to shift their perspective. Disinfection has to rise to the top of the priority list. Establishing a clear assignment of duties and a detailed scope of work is always important for an effective cleaning program, but it is absolutely vital for disinfection. First, parking operators need to determine who is in charge of cleaning tasks: parking personnel or janitorial workers? Next, they need to establish the tasks, frequency, chemicals, and equipment that will be used for disinfection.

Training will be vital to the successful and consistent execution of the cleaning program. To some degree, all personnel will play a role in maintaining the health of the facility and keeping themselves safe. Employees who traditionally didn't need training on cleaning, (such as parking attendants, shuttle drivers, and valets), will need to be trained on PPE usage and best practices to reduce the likelihood that they transmit or are exposed to pathogens. Prepare for initial training, ongoing reinforcement, and adjustments as new information emerges.



### **Frictionless Parking Adoption Will Continue to Increase**

Frictionless parking consists of using apps for guidance, reservations, and payment, as well as license plate recognition technology to enable hands-free parking. It's been a major growth area in parking for several years now. Commuters can find, reserve, and pay for a spot using their smartphones, while license plate technology or radio-frequency identification (RFIDs) are used for verification purposes. Commuters enjoy the convenience of frictionless parking and operators gain a competitive edge by using them.

Now, the hands-free (and therefore, hygienic) benefits of frictionless parking are becoming more prominent. There's no ticket, credit card, or cash to exchange, and there are no buttons on pay stations or meters to push. Drivers can manage the entire parking experience from their own phone, minimizing exposure to employees and touch points. These benefits will only expand the adoption of frictionless parking among hygiene-conscious commuters and parking operators.

### **The Future is Now**

In many ways, the future is now. COVID-19 has changed consumer behavior in ways that will remain for some time. A portion of the population will continue to be hyper-aware of cleanliness, especially at large facilities, like shopping centers and airports. Now is the time to start taking proactive steps to make facilities safer and build customer confidence. Those who prepare now will be in the best position to come out ahead on the other side of this crisis.

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