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WHAT IS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM IN THE CARPET CLEANING BUSINESS?

We sure do spend a lot of time these days talking about all kinds of issues, controversies, debates, and opinions. There's nothing wrong with that. Everything I know is a combination of things that other people have taught me. The problem is, in this day and age of informational exchange, one very extremely important item is often overlooked. Our industry has come a long way in terms of technical expertise. With IICRC schools, magazines, associations, and more active suppliers "preaching" the virtues of knowing what you are doing, it's not hard to find sources for information on how to safely and effectively clean or restore something. As a matter of fact, if cleaners don't take the advantage of these learning opportunities, it's their own fault.

The question remains though, what is the biggest problem in the cleaning industry today? To put it bluntly, many professional cleaners are using issues, controversies, debates, opinions, and technical knowledge to overlook what is a far more pressing problem. Is their business financially successful?

I guess this can be summarized in the debate I overheard between two professional cleaners arguing about carpet protectors. They were obviously willing to kill to "defend the honor" of their "favorite product". But when I asked them how much of their "favorite product" they had sold in the last ninety days, embarrassment set in. Neither had sold more than a gallon. Another cleaner told me that his business was failing because of a fiber producer. Another one blamed a local price merchandising franchise. Folks, what's going on here? Do all these issues matter that much? Why are we so worried about the "performance" of stain resistant carpets when we don't have any scheduled to clean this week? My good friend, John Maucieri, put it best, "What we do almost anything to avoid is, that nagging problem - too many cleaners aren't making enough money and they're not cleaning enough carpets. Rather than confront them with that problem, we fall back to debating cleaning methods or hidden agendas or personalities."

Consider yourself confronted. We spend an awful lot of time these days trying to inform and educate our fellow cleaners. That's fine, but perhaps rather than add more fuel to the latest controversial fire, we would be serving our industry better by making them confront that "biggest problem". I know of many cleaning companies that do not possess a great deal of long term financial security. This is not the fault of a fiber producer, a franchise cleaner, the uneducated consumer, or even President Bill Clinton.

Companies succeed in this industry regardless of method, system, opinion, or issue. They market themselves well. They manage themselves well. They meet their customer's needs. They are there to serve. What do these companies have in common? They focus on being a better, smarter, wiser, business person first. They focus on technical expertise second. If at all, they focus on controversies, issues, debates and opinions last...and they never let those controversies, issues, debates, and opinions remove their primary attention from purpose number one.

Now I know this kind of talk stirs up some feelings of ethical indignation. "Is money all I should be concerned about?", they ask. Of course not, but it is the main indicator of whether or not your company will be around five years from now. You see, it is the purpose of your company to provide you and your family and your employees and their families with a financially secure future and a decent living today. No amount of technical knowledge or righteous attitude can explain that away.

What should we do about it? The goal is simple. We need to clean more carpets. We need to do it at a fair and decent profit margin. We should not depend on a fiber producer, an association, a magazine, a carpet retailer, a supplier, or even another fellow cleaner to do it for us. We should not let personalities, issues, controversies, debates and opinions deter us. It's not someone else's or something else's fault. Success or failure lies firmly in our lap.

How do we do it? We focus on the biggest problem! We need to secure more business at a fair and decent price. We can only do that by marketing our businesses better. Recently, I got a call from a cleaner complaining about the misinformation a competitor had put in a mailing. I asked him if he had considered doing a mailing to those same people to promote his point of view. "Mailings never work", was his reply. Marketing and advertising programs that are consistent will work. Some may work better than others, but the key to successful advertising is consistency and timing. We have little control over timing. Therefore, the best way to assure ourselves of being there at the right time is to be consistent.

How can associations, magazines, suppliers, etc. help? Focus their attention on marketing. How can the cleaner help himself/herself? Focus his/her attention on ways to learn to market better. Help is available. The marketing help that is available may have just have a little dust on top of it. They've been filed away for too long while everyone learned about the reverse molecular expansion of the type 6 nylon carpet...or some such thing.

Finally, how do we keep the money once we've got some of it? That simply boils down to managing the business. A cleaner once actually told me "I know I'm losing money on every job, but I'm making up for it in volume." Once again, the associations, magazines, suppliers, etc. can help by focusing on management. The cleaner can help himself/herself by seeking better ways to manage the business.

The task won't be easy. You see, it's a lot easier to clean a Haitian cotton than it is to market and manage a business. There are many correct ways to clean the Haitian cotton, and we've got a clean sofa to prove our point. The only way to prove our marketing and management skills is to consistently make a profit and to be liked by our employees as well as our customers. Who can be used to motivate us to improve? Just look around. There are lots of financially successful cleaning companies. How did they get that way? It sure wasn't by debating with another cleaner the attributes of a particular issue. It was by marketing and managing their business better.

About the author:

R. Doyle Bloss is the Chief Executive Officer for Steam Way International, Inc. in Denver, Colorado. Steam Way manufactures carpet and upholstery cleaning equipment and chemicals and supports their customers through both technical schools and marketing and management schools.