



1994 Technical Bulletins

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A COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT DEMANDS MORE FROM SUPPLIERS

There was a time when a professional cleaner who was seeking to find a reputable supplier for his/her products needed to identify a company that was willing to stand behind the products that it sold. That was good advice. But things are changing. The costs, regulation, and responsibilities surrounding your business are making it harder everyday to keep that competitive and profitable edge. There are a lot of good suppliers of cleaning and restoration equipment, chemicals, and supplies in our industry today. They have demonstrated their willingness to stand behind their products. However, In today's competitive environment, that simply isn't enough any more. A professional cleaner who is seeking to sharpen his/her competitive ax, can't depend on a supplier who just stands behind the products that they sell. They need to find companies who also stand behind and support their customers. You'll find this difference in examining a supplier's commitment in how they spend their money. Obviously, they should stand behind the equipment, chemicals, and supplies that they sell. They also must however become involved in supporting and promoting their customers success.

There are three distinctive markets for professional cleaning that have evolved - "Bait and Switch", Price Merchandising, and Image. These three markets all have inherent advantages and disadvantages. The fact remains that all are competitive. Every company that wants to succeed in each market needs to have an edge on the competition. Another important factor affecting today's marketplace is the product itself - carpet. More and more, fiber producers and carpet manufacturers are paying attention to how there product is and should be serviced after it has been sold. This change in both product and its manufacturer has brought about a greater need for communication directly from the cleaning industry to the manufacturing industry. It has also brought about a greater need for the professional cleaner to have access to technical assistance in the areas surrounding how to properly deal with all of the questions that may arise in properly maintaining warranted carpets. Out of this change in technology in the carpet manufacturing industry has arisen a greater focus on carpet consumer customer support. One of the inevitable conclusions that many carpet manufacturers are reaching is that professional cleaners can play a vital role as an important communication and service channel to the carpet consumer. Many franchises, cleaning system and method manufacturers, cleaning product suppliers and even the IICRC have begun to develop programs to serve to work directly with the carpet manufacturing industry. Many have been very successful. Dry extraction powder cleaning agents have been widely and successfully marketed to many within the manufacturing industry. One particular manufacturer of cleaning products has practically built their whole marketing strategy around working directly with carpet mills. Today over 30 mills directly mention or recommend their customers and they are one of the most successful suppliers in the industry, even though their cleaning system differs greatly from the mainstream of thought. National franchises have successfully worked with the mills and fiber producers. It is too easy to chalk all of these efforts up to simply that these companies are "wining and dining" executives. There is no doubt that the manufacturing side of the carpet industry has concluded that there are advantages to working directly with professional cleaners.

Where does all of this leave you and your business? One of the key words in independent professional carpet cleaning company is independent. One of the very likely reasons that you own your own company is so that you can have control over its fortunes. How do you rectify your intense desire for being in control of your own business with this rapidly changing and increasing complex and political industry?

One way is through the IICRC. Without a doubt the IICRC has become one of the most influential organizations in the carpet industry. It is simply too large to be ignored. Another connection you can make is through the regional and national associations. Networking and camaraderie are a must in this rapidly changing environment. However, there are limitations to either of these

groups and what they can do for your business. The one thing in common that all professional cleaners have is the purchase and use of cleaning equipment, products, and supplies. Quite simply, the time has come for professional cleaners to expect more from their suppliers than products.

It simply isn't enough any more just to expect good products. There is more to your success than four color equipment ads and mailers trying to get you to buy the latest gizmo. In the long run, your success will still primarily be dependent upon you. Sales is still sales. Marketing is still marketing. Quality cleaning is still quality cleaning. What you need to look for from your supplier are things that will give you that competitive edge; access to the latest technical information, and a higher level of marketing, management and promotional support than you have ever received. There will be a cost to this. If you are only looking at price in your selection of products, it is unlikely that your supplier will find a need or desire to include a higher level of support in their service. That does not mean, however, that you will have lower profits. Better business produces better take home pay. There are some things that you can begin to look for in working with a supplier of products. The supplier you choose may not have all of these, but the more they are offering to you, the sharper your competitive edge can become.

- **National Customer Referral Network** - As working directly with the manufacturing industry results in more need for access to trained certified professional cleaners who can provide a problem solving and high quality service, there needs to be a way for the carpet fiber producers, carpet mills, carpet retailers, interior designers and decorators, indoor air quality professionals, carpet installers, insurance adjusters, and other concerned professionals to be able to locate your company and access its services.
- **Fiber Producers and Carpet Mill Endorsements** - As the carpet manufacturing industry concludes the importance and necessity of proper maintenance of their product, they will hopefully look closely at how to find and recommend trained certified professional cleaners. If they are going to stick their "necks" out by recommending certain types and methods of maintenance, their "comfort zone" is going to be increased by identifying and recommending cleaners that are part of a system with the right equipment, chemical, training, and most importantly, quality assurance in performance and customer relations. This can best be done by working with referral systems that can give them the best information.
- **Technical Advice From Experienced Professionals** - With rapid changes in technology and the increasing complexity and political nature of the product itself, "know-it-all-ism" will find itself being increasingly embarrassed. You're never too experienced to need an occasional word of advice or support. Your supplier should be able to do more than name a product. They should stand ready with alternatives, present potential obstacles and how to deal with them, and be able to assure you that the advice they are giving is in the best interest of your customer - whether it be the carpet consumer or carpet mill.
- **Product Knowledge** - How many times have you found yourself saying "Can't they just make one product that would do everything?" Yet with just a little thought, you realize the differences in soiling conditions, fiber content, and installations means that in order to use the full effect of cleaning chemistry safely and effectively, they should also have a full range of products within their arsenal. Their supplier should be able to talk with them intelligently about how the products work, what potential obstacles they may face in their usage, and how to safely and effectively use them. Many suppliers today, in an effort to make sure that they have what their customers "want", carry such a multitude of product lines that they don't know enough about them. They have become order takers - "If you know what you want, we've got it" - rather than product support sales people. This may not be of concern to you now, but as the industry becomes more complex, so will its products.
- **IICRC Certification Training** - Consumers are confused about how to find a professional cleaner. Many people believe that a confused consumer is most likely to look for a well-known franchise, assuming that since they are a part of a system, there must be a more consistent level of competent performance. Others believe that many consumers look for a locally owned and operated company because a small local business takes more pride in their work. Both of these feelings are probably right to a certain extent. One consistent message can be found in this. The consumer wants quality assurance and competent performance. The International Institute of Carpet & Upholstery Certification represents the best way to communicate to the consumer a competent level of performance whether you are a franchise or an independent cleaner. But IICRC training takes on an even more important role than providing consumer confidence. Knowledge itself is useless unless it is put into action. But knowledge, combined with action brings power; and maybe even more importantly, it brings self-confidence. There are a lot of people offering IICRC approved training. Seek a level of teaching that teaches practical application and self-confidence in addition to knowledge.

- **Marketing Support** - Probably the most significant change you will see in our industry during the nineties will be the realization that technical knowledge is only useful if it can be communicated in an understandable way to the consuming public. Effective advertising and marketing programs can be used almost anywhere. Companies will want to maintain their own identity, yet they will want to use a marketing program that encompasses “membership” to a more national system. It will no longer be enough to sell products. Professional cleaners should demand that their suppliers also work to create and enhance marketing programs that create a synergistic effect between local ownership and control, and belonging to a nationally maintained network of professionals.
- **National Name Recognition** - Part of this effort to create an awareness of a national network access will be tying into a recognized name, logo or system. IICRC Certification will certainly enhance this. But being part of a network that is supported by a consistent marketing program, that has recognition and recommendation amongst the carpet manufacturing industry and that is actively involved in all aspects of the industry will assist the cleaner in providing a clear message to the consumer of competence, professionalism, and care.

All of the things that have made your business a success in the past are still very relevant. Obviously, you still need to select equipment, cleaning solutions, and supplies that provide quality, money making levels of performance. But no longer can you afford for your supplier to simply be an order taker for your products. The level of support needed for profitability today includes having your product supplier not only standing behind the products that they sell, it also must include a deeper commitment of involvement, marketing, and awareness. The supplier should also stand behind their customers. You can obviously choose to ignore this advice. But you may well be sacrificing a part of your competitive edge to a more organized, motivated, and networked group of professional who realize the power of working together for common good. Think about it.

Steam Way International is more than just a product supplier and manufacturer. We provide a comprehensive support basis to our customer that encompasses all of the above and more. Don't accept just good products anymore. Steam Way will supply you with the very best in equipment and chemicals, but we won't stop there. Call your local Steam Way Distributor and find out what the “TOTAL SUPPORT” promise is all about.

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.