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SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS -

What Should You Do About Customers Who Inquire About Chemical or Allergic Sensitivities

It is becoming more and more common for professional cleaners and restorers to be asked by their potential cleaning and restoration customers about the cleaning and restoration solutions that might be used in their home or business. The potential customers are usually inquiring in relation to concerns they have about potential chemical or allergic sensitivities that someone in their home or business may have and the use of cleaning, deodorization, or restoration solutions in their home or business. Very often, when faced with this situation, cleaners and restorers are not sure how to respond. There are basic understandings that we must accept in order to define how best to handle this situation. First, the only people that are qualified to make judgments about health and medical conditions are medical doctors. You and I are not qualified to comment based upon anything other than our experiences with other customers. Don't try to take the place of the medical doctor. Don't try to interpret how any human being may react when exposed to cleaning chemicals. Secondly, nothing is fool proof to handle these situations. No set of procedures can be totally depended upon to solve every medical or liability problem that might be the result of these encounters. What we will simply present here are some suggestions as to what to say and how to handle these inquiries.

Allergic Sensitivities

Understand that allergic sensitivities are almost undefinable from your and my point-of-view. A person can be allergic to anything. Only a medical doctor can analyze and even test as to whether a person might be "allergic" to any cleaning or restoration solution you might use, or the individual ingredients within them. If someone is concerned about allergic sensitivities, then explain to him/her that it is your understanding that people can be allergic to just about anything. One phrase that our customers have had success with is this:

"Mrs. Jones, we appreciate your bringing this subject up. We clean hundreds of carpets per year with the same cleaning solutions we would use in your home; and as far as we are aware, no one has had an allergic response to them. However, as you know, people can be allergic to anything. There is no way for us to know for sure whether a person might be allergic to our cleaning solutions. Since you are concerned about allergic sensitivities, there must be someone in your home or business who has had problems with allergic reactions to cleaning solutions. Are you using special laundry or dishwashing solutions that can be purchased through allergy doctors? (The chances are very good that they are not) Well if the person you named is not allergic to these types of laundry and dishwashing detergents, the chances are that they would not be allergic to our cleaning solutions, since the ingredients would be similar. What we would like to do is provide you with copies of material safety data sheets for the cleaning solutions we will use in your home or business as well as a list of the ingredients that are listed on the bottle labels. We would encourage you to have the person's allergy doctor review these materials. If they say it is acceptable to use these solutions, then we will have you sign our workorder specifying that the doctor approved the cleaning solutions in question, and we can proceed with the work. If the doctor has some concerns, we can either choose a different cleaning solution for the doctor to review based upon his/her suggestions or we can clean the carpet with hot water only, using no chemicals or cleaning agents of any kind whatsoever. Does this process sound acceptable to you?"

If the customer desires you do so, then proceed to provide your customer with Material Safety Data Sheets. In addition, all Steam Way chemical solutions have the five most prominent ingredients identified on the label. If need be, provide the customer's medical doctor with these ingredients listed on the sides of the Steam Way chemical bottle. If their doctor approves these products to be used, have the customer sign a waiver releasing your company from responsibility. The waiver might read something like this.

"Our cleaning technician has provided us with the opportunity to review the cleaning solutions used for this job. We have consulted with our physician and have determined these cleaning solutions to be acceptable.. "

If possible, have the sensitive person leave the premises while the carpet is being cleaned and for six to eight hours after the carpet has been cleaned or until it is dry. When cleaning the carpets, use as minimal of cleaning solution as necessary. Ventilate! Ventilate! Ventilate! while cleaning.

You always have the option of cleaning the carpet with just hot water and of using no chemical solutions. Although the quality of the cleaning job will lessen, it is certainly better than not cleaning the carpets at all.

One thing that you should keep in mind, many allergy doctors have the mistaken idea that using hot water extraction carpet cleaning exacerbates dust mite related allergens, and they recommend using an absorbent compound such as Capture® or Host® when cleaning carpeting for people who are allergic to dust mite allergens. We respectfully disagree. Scientific research indicates that cleaning by any method does not increase dust mite allergens; and in most cases, it seems to temporarily reduce them.

CHEMICAL SENSITIVITIES

This is a much more difficult issue. Allergic responses are almost always identifiable and "recreatable" by a medical doctor. Chemical sensitivities are a much grayer area. There are large areas of disagreement, even in the medical community, about diagnosing chemical sensitivity. Multiple chemical sensitivity syndrome is thought by some doctors to be a verifiable, diagnosable disease, others think that there is no such thing.

When a customer brings up the cleaning solutions you are using, don't get defensive. You have nothing to be afraid of. The vast majority of cleaning, deodorizing, and restorations solutions used within our industry will not cause any acute immediate health effects. One way to handle this situation might be as follows:

"Mrs. Jones, we appreciate your bringing this subject up. We clean hundreds of carpets per year with the same cleaning solutions we would use in your home. If you are concerned about these cleaning solutions, what we would like to do is provide you with copies of material safety data sheets for the cleaning solutions we will use in your home or business as well as a list of the ingredients that are listed on the bottle labels. We would encourage you to have your doctor review these materials. If the/she says it is acceptable to use these solutions, then we will have you sign our work order specifying that the doctor approved the cleaning solutions in question, and we can proceed with the work. If the doctor has some concerns, we can either choose a different cleaning solution for the doctor to review based upon his/her suggestions or we can clean the carpet with hot water only, using no chemicals or cleaning agents of any kind whatsoever. Does this process sound acceptable to you?

If the customer's doctor (or any other "expert" with whom they might consult) will not approve any of your cleaning products, we could propose cleaning with water only. If we are cleaning with water only, the procedure would be to groom the carpet to raise the nap prior to cleaning the carpet. Vacuum , vacuum, vacuum! Prespray with water only, rake in, let dwell 5 minutes. Set your truck mounted carpet cleaning machine at 200° - 220°, and rinse with water only. Take slow wet strokes and several dry strokes. When done, groom the carpets. Ventilate, Ventilate, Ventilate! Air movers are a must. Simply do as good of a job as you can.

If this is not acceptable, and they are still concerned about your cleaning solutions, we would simply suggest that you turn down the job. There is no reason for you to get involved in a situation where answers cannot be determined before you start the job.

WHAT IF THE PROBLEM ARISE AFTER YOU DO THE JOB?

It is actually better when your customer brings up his/her concerns before the job starts. The more difficult issue is what to do if they complain about allergic sensitivities or chemical sensitivities after you have already done the job. Here are some basic rules of response:

- 1) Listen. Hear them out. Find out exactly what their question/problem is.
- 2) Second. Don't interpret their medical condition. You are not a doctor. It never ceases to amaze us how so many people will call and say something like this:

"Your crew cleaned my carpet yesterday. Now my wife is having (fill in medical calamity). What are you going to do about it?"

If a person thinks he is sick, they should go to the doctor, not call his carpet cleaner. Carpet cleaners clean carpets. Doctors make medical evaluations. Encourage them to seek medical attention.

- 3) Offer to provide copies of material safety data sheets and ingredient listings to them and their medical doctor. Be prepared to fax these materials to their physician.
- 4) Don't tell them to call Steam Way (or any other supplier for that matter). When you put us in the middle of the situation, we don't always get the whole story. Something can too easily be said so that it gets misinterpreted. Suggest to the doctor if he/she has any questions after reviewing the MSDS sheet and ingredients to call us. Do not have your customer call us first. If you need help, you call us!
- 5) Don't panic. There is almost always a cause for their ill feelings that has nothing to do with the cleaning or deodorizing that you did. When the doctor informs them of that they are usually embarrassed that they raised such a fuss. Reassure them that you were glad to help.
- 6) If the problem seems to still remain, notify your liability insurance carrier. They will give you needed advice on what to do next.

CONCLUSION

Never underestimate the customer's sensitivity. If you do not want to follow these procedures exactly, then don't take these kinds of jobs. Walk away. Better to have lost a sale today, than to spend the next week on the phone answering questions often that have no answers. Listen to your gut instinct; if you "feel" trouble, turn the job down. Don't become so intent on being a "helper" that you lose site that there are some people just waiting for someone to blame for something and to try and recover "damages." If in doubt, don't take the job.