



When the Client Wants a Miracle

How to cope with cleaning conditions that are beyond your control

by Erin Brereton



Anago of Cleveland President Jeff Schaffer was surprised to receive a panicked call from a fitness center client about footprints its manager had noticed after a cleaning.

Anago services several workout facilities in the Cleveland area; Schaffer knew the commercial cleaning company understood what treatments and tools gym environments require. However, after checking scheduling records, the root of the issue became clear: Anago's crew had finished cleaning the 24-hour fitness facility at midnight—hours before the last members had completed their workouts and left at 3 a.m.

Anago's client might wish it could magically maintain mark-free surfaces on a round-the-clock basis; but in reality, without someone shadowing each fitness club member as they move from machine to machine, it's virtually impossible.

"We sometimes have to remind people that we can only clean what we clean while we're there," Schaffer says. "Once we're gone, if somebody walks on it, there's nothing we can do."

In some instances, like the one mentioned here, client requests may not line up with reality. However, while you can't prevent challenging client demands, the way you respond to them can determine the outcome clients expect—and potentially make or break your business relationship.

Addressing Improbable Expectations

Unreasonable requests, according to Laurie Sewell, president and CEO of maintenance service provider Servicon Systems Inc., typically occur when clients are trying to reduce costs and have creative ideas about how to make that happen.

"A lot of times, clients come to you with the solution," Sewell says, "not the problem." At the same time, they don't always fully understand what needs to be done to restore a material, or if that's even possible, and just need a little guidance.

To help prepare clients for the most realistic results, consider the following steps:

Make sure you understand the issue. Before you agree to a challenging cleaning scenario, discuss clients' desired results. Ask what comprises the stains, when they occurred, and what the client has used on them to ensure they can be successfully treated.

For instance, if a customer knows a carpet stain happened when someone spilled coffee, but doesn't know what type of coffee caused it, full stain removal may be difficult. Decaffeinated coffee, for example, may pose challenges due to synthetic dye that may be in it, according to Lindsay Russell, director of the Scotland-based cleaning and restoration provider Hydro Kleen Services Ltd.

"The same can be said for stone cleaning and grout lines," Russell says. "Grout lines and natural stone can often present pitfalls where dirt has been sealed in from a previous poor cleaning attempt, or by staining from certain drink spills."

Choose your words carefully. Being (politely) upfront with clients about the weathered state of their surface material, restroom, or other area can help prep clients for its post-cleaning appearance.

When clients ask Rhet Pulley, branch manager and carpet technician for Utah-based Clean Green Carpets, to revive a dirty, worn carpet, he makes sure clients know, despite his best efforts, the carpet will still show wear once he's done. If the client balks when it doesn't look brand new, Pulley gently reminds the person about his initial assessment—and offers to clean a portion of any problem areas again.

"I tell them I want them to feel it's as clean as it can get, and if this time, [a problem area] comes out cleaner, we'll do the whole area over again," he says. "Even just saying 'I'm willing to' tends to diffuse any situation, because most people are expecting an argument."

Show clients what can—and cannot—be done. Instead of rebuking clients who suggest cleaning materials or techniques they feel will fully restore a beyond-repair surface, Schaffer from Anago doesn't shoot down their idea—even if he's sure it won't produce the desired effect.

"In those types of conversations, I say, 'I'm going to try your method, and we'll see the results,'" he says. "I don't do it in a demeaning way; I try not to be confrontational. But when they see it doesn't work, I suggest trying what I think will work."

An earnest cleaning attempt can also help clients see certain surface materials or stains will be impossible to significantly improve. For example, when Hydro Kleen was recently asked to remove greasy cooking oil residue that had yellowed a blue vinyl floor in an office kitchen, the cleaning provider spent 90 minutes trying to fix a test area before telling the client the situation was beyond repair.

Cut ties with difficult customers. Explaining possible outcomes will usually satisfy most clients; however, Pulley says a handful will insist cleaners aren't doing everything they can—a scenario he experienced recently with a client who wasn't happy with a high-traffic carpet area Clean Green Carpets had gone over multiple times.

At that point, Pulley says, it may be best to part ways.

"Usually, if you get that far, they're not going to be happy with anything, and there's nothing you can do," he says. "Hopefully, you can say, 'We've shown you the difference; you can see where it did clean up, but this area will not go any further. We've tried everything we could.'"

Seizing Business Opportunities

To Sewell, a challenging client request is not always a bad thing.

"Sometimes they're fun, because you may get to learn a new skill," she says. "I don't look at it as something negative; I look at it as a value-add opportunity."

Be willing to step up in unusual circumstances. Servicon has stepped in to help clients in the past. When a client found its facility overrun with feral cats, a Servicon employee spent time researching a resolution and eventually found an organization that would take the animals.

"The client was delighted," Sewell says. "We want to be their solutions provider and partner in all facility-related needs. We encourage them to come to us first."

Help clients to identify when new assets or other professionals are necessary. If an item is too worn to properly clean and restore, Pulley provides clients with general product lifetime expectancy information and approximate prices to replace it. He also often recommends companies to clients that can replace flooring and other materials—and the business from those companies can be reciprocal.

Sweetening the pot by offering companies a fee, cleaning discount, or reciprocal recommendation in exchange for referrals, as Clean Green Carpets sometimes does, can help cleaning companies potentially increase business—provided they partner with quality providers.

Taking the Proper Measures

Clients may not love hearing their floor, countertops, or grout can't simply be scrubbed and polished to look like new; some may be in serious denial about their facility's condition.

However, proactively providing vendor names and other advice can go a long way toward strengthening client relationships—and help prevent clients from blaming their property's worn appearance on its cleaning services, instead of its age and condition.

"People just naturally want to tell their clients what they want to hear to make them happy," Schaffer says. "But in the service industry, if you don't identify what the situation is and be honest about your expectations, you're going to look like you don't know what you are doing."

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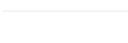
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