



## Housekeeping: It Pays To Be Clean - Solutions Not Problems



**It is now widely accepted in the hospitality industry that the real source of customer loyalty, retention and growth is the quality of the experience that each customer has with your hotel or restaurant. Customers remember experiences more than they remember products or services. Positive experiences build brand loyalty. Negative experiences will often lead to customer defection.**

Not surprisingly, most leading hotels around the world have implemented robust Customer Experience Management Programmes to proactively manage the customer experience across multiple touch points and at all stages of the Customer Journey. A range of innovations have been introduced, often supported by new technology; for example, personalised online booking services, digital signage, the use of mobile for automated check-in/check-out, free Wi Fi and so on.

While customers, especially business customers, now expect technology innovation, it is also critical to get the basics right. Even in an era of disruptive technology, basic cleanliness can still be a deal breaker. Consider the following:

- Cleanliness is one of the most important factors influencing the guest experience. Various surveys have shown that it often ranks higher than other features such as comfort, customer service, Wi Fi access, location and so on. Tripadvisor fully recognises this with 'Cleanliness' being one of the six customer rating criteria used along with 'Sleep Quality', 'Location', 'Rooms', 'Service' and 'Value'.
- In the restaurant sector, academic studies have shown that hygiene is one of the most important factors influencing customer choice; especially cleanliness of the restaurant, food, china, cutlery, service personnel, toilet and kitchen.
- It is almost certain that customers who have had a 'dirty' experience will not return. More importantly, in a Social Media era, they are likely to tell others by sharing their experience on Tripadvisor, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or other Social Network sites.
- With two-thirds of travellers using Tripadvisor at some stage in their journey planning, 90 per cent would avoid booking a hotel labelled as 'dirty'. A negative online review could lead to the loss of an estimated 30 customers representing a loss of revenue far exceeding the savings from economising on cleaning.

It is clear that a strategic approach to cleanliness should be adopted. Housekeeping is a strategic asset critical to the overall customer experience. It is a major driver of customer loyalty, retention and revenue growth. Don't let it be a cause of customer defection.

The same is true in a wide range of other sectors whether it be health care establishments, leisure facilities, shopping malls, education, restaurants and so on. Cleaning suppliers and housekeepers need to collaborate to provide solutions, not problems!

### **Keeping It Clean**

The role of the housekeeping/cleaning department is to:

- *Reduce/eliminate guest complaints relating to accommodation/building cleanliness* – Several years ago, a major UK leisure operator told us that 75% of customer complaints about their Staycation holiday were cleanliness related. Working together, we supported the operator in implementing a far reaching quality standards procedure for improving cleanliness and the overall customer experience. The rate of complaints plummeted.
- *Increase guest/customer satisfaction* – Thereby building positive word of mouth effects. Utilising the network effect of social media, positive word of mouth can spread very quickly. Negative word of mouth (poor cleanliness) will spread even more quickly. Used properly, social media can become a very important "free" marketing channel for good operators with high standards of cleanliness

- *Ensure standardisation of methods, equipment and consumables* – To ensure that the job is done properly and efficiently. The old saying: “You can lead a horse to water...” If the ammunition housekeepers require is taken away from them or indeed not provided at all, then how can they fire the gun!
- *Ensure cleaning staff are well trained* – Staff training is critical for getting the best results, safely and in a cost effective manner. Most reputable chemical suppliers will provide excellent in-situ training for housekeeping staff. This will include advice dispelling “housekeeping myths” about choosing the best chemical to use for different tasks and surfaces. For example, many housekeepers will have a bottle of furniture polish in their trolleys or carry trays. Although housekeepers traditionally like the smell of furniture polishes, in many cases this type of product is not required at all especially when used on non-absorbent laminates or veneer surfaces. When cleaning laminates/veneers use a multi-purpose cleaner/soap. A furniture polish works best on porous surfaces which absorbs the product. A furniture polish works by penetrating the surface and depositing waxes that make the wood surface shine due to conditioning. If the surface is a non-porous surface like Formica, veneer or a laminate wood “look-a-like” surface, the product will not penetrate the surface and will lead to dried chemical residues and lead to tacky surfaces.
- *Ensure the consistency of the hotel or venue’s product* – Providing a consistent customer experience over time and across multi-sites and geographically dispersed locations. When a customer walks into a premium, mid-range or budget brand hotel, they expect the same quality of cleanliness regardless of location or country.

In striving to achieve the above, Housekeeping/Cleaning Managers face a number of additional challenges:

- *Staff recruitment and retention* – Housekeeping/cleaning is a people business, expensive to resource. This has led many operators, including quality hotel chains, to outsource their housekeeping/cleaning requirements. Whether this ‘one-butt-to-kick’ approach leads to guaranteed improved standards at a lower cost is questionable.
- *Systems* – Housekeeping/cleaning is also an activity where operators rely heavily on migrant workers from a wide range of different nationalities. Systems need to be put in place to eliminate confusion and mistakes due to language barriers. Colour coding and alphanumeric labelling of cleaning materials can help address this, but an integrated approach is required when employing large numbers of migrant workers from diverse backgrounds.
- *Too little time, too few staff* – Overworked, under-resourced and underpaid staff will not go the extra mile; standards of cleanliness and the overall customer experience will inevitably fall. This will have a direct negative impact on customer loyalty, repeat business and the bottom line. How a hotel room or venue is cleaned is neither here nor there for the customer, as long as it is done properly and routinely and to an acceptable standard. There is a critical cost/benefit decision to be made by the

operator: invest in cleanliness, keep it clean and derive the benefits associated with positive customer experiences (repeat business and brand advocacy) OR cut corners resulting in negative Tripadvisor comments. In a highly competitive market place, second best is not good enough.

- *Budgets and property maintenance* – Many Housekeeping/Cleaning Managers are pushing a big boulder up a very steep hill in terms of what they are being asked to do by their employers due to budget constraints and lack of investment in hotel/venue infrastructure. The state of hotel fabric and property maintenance will have a direct impact on what even the best housekeeper can feasibly achieve in the time available to clean. If bathroom tiles are old and cracked, then mould will grow in this hot moist environment, leading to the need for timely mould removal – another housekeeping task and specialist chemical product to add to the list. If room ventilation is poor, then mal-odours will permeate from curtains and carpets and odour control as a remedial measure needs to be addressed. Property maintenance needs to be at the top of the agenda to ensure proper levels of cleanliness achieved in a cost effective manner. We can't blame the housekeeper for not meeting minimum standards if the operator is not investing in fabric, fixtures and fittings.
- *Legislation/regulations* – Most owners/operators have little idea how complex the rules and regulations are covering the use of cleaning chemicals. Over the next few years, there is going to be a whole raft of new safety and registration legislation which will place an additional burden on the Housekeeping/Cleaning Manager to ensure that they are complying with the most recent legislative changes.

Based on the above, it is clear that operators (especially multi-location operators and those seeking rapid growth) need to implement a coordinated and integrated strategic approach to '*keeping it clean and safe*' with proper resources (people, equipment and materials) to do the job properly, led by a strong management team where second best is just not good enough and delivered by experienced, well trained staff who are treated as internal customers.

Based on our extensive experience we would offer the following advice:

1. Decide whether to outsource or keep in-house the housekeeping function, based on the consistent quality standard you demand not just for money reasons – it could be a false economy making this decision on the cheapest offering.
2. Strive to eliminate customer complaints. Why leave it to TripAdvisor when you can talk to customers directly during and after their stay? Developing 'actionable insights' based on customer conversations can lead to improvements being made to the benefit of all parties.
3. Ensure that the housekeeping/cleaning function is resourced properly. Don't try to cut corners.

4. Ensure that you work closely with a highly experienced, credible and competent chemicals and cleaning consumables supplier – a supplier who is happy to make regular monthly visits to assist you in monitoring cleaning standards, ensuring that you are getting the best from the installed equipment and materials supplied.
5. Be realistic in terms of the time allocated to cleaning bedrooms, public areas, kitchens etc on a daily basis. While operating and HR budgets need to be adhered to, housekeeping/cleaning is a strategic asset critical to the overall customer experience. This will also lead to better staff morale within housekeeping/cleaning resulting in higher employee retention levels.
6. Invest in staff training programmes, ensuring that cleaning is done effectively and cost efficiently; and most importantly safely. Operators should utilise the supplier base to assist in staff training. Competent chemical suppliers will provide training sessions on site, physically demonstrating products and their safe application.
7. Make sure that you are aware of the environmental, safety and performance credentials of your supplier in order that you are confident that the products being used comply with industry standards and regulatory requirements. A credible chemical supplier will provide evidence of their competency in these areas and should keep the operator up to speed with significant legal changes to the products being supplied.
8. Maintain the property. We can't really blame the housekeeper for not meeting minimum standards if operator investment in the fabric, fixtures and fittings are not being met.