

How Well Are We Getting Our Message Out? (Continued)

issues. This is a win-win for everyone involved. And you both are in the fire safety business. Have a plan and bring a copy of an inspection program and lots of pictures.

MG: Budget constraints are one of the main excuses we hear from AHJs that prevent them from doing what we consider proper inspections. How did you implement your program and, more importantly, sustain it throughout this tough economy?

JS: Fire code requires hoods, grease-removal devices, fans, and ducts shall be cleaned at intervals necessary to prevent the accumulation of grease. In order to inspect for compliance during routine fire inspections, it was necessary to shut down the cooking equipment during business hours, which cost the restaurants a fair amount of money. It also took a great deal of inspection time. When we began discussing the program, I outlined the need and the savings to both the city and the restaurant owner by doing the inspections right after the cleaning was performed. As you can imagine, everyone was interested in efficiency and money savings.

MG: And, of course, that time too is the best to find any discrepancies. It is easiest to fix shortcomings while the cleaners are still on-site. I believe participation from proactive fire professionals, such as yourself, in our semiannual IKECA meetings brings on some of the best open discussions of the entire conference. The personal knowledge shared is extremely rewarding for all IKECA members. We know what we all took from your speech, and we hope this interaction was beneficial to you also.

JS: It was.

MG: We are always looking to grow our organization. There is strength in good numbers! We want to add more quality companies in the joint quest to provide the best service possible. Have you discussed IKECA with any other companies?

JS: I have mentioned IKECA to several new cleaners as a source for information.

MG: Do you have any suggestions on how to get more quality AHJs to come speak at future engagements?

JS: Just invite them.

MG: Now the hard part: Please break us down as a group. Tell us, in your opinion, what you feel we should concentrate on and if there are any areas in which we are coming up short.

JS: I applaud you for your desire to increase the professionalism of your industry. Education, sharing of information, and follow-up through inspections are the keys to solving any of the issues I have commented on in this interview. Please share your secrets with all who desire to learn, and don't look at them so much as your competitor. Inspect your own work even when the AHJ does not have an inspection program.

MG: Great advice, as always! I appreciate your candid comments and valuable suggestions. Thank you again for your past participation in our organization and your commitment to our shared values of fire protection.

JS: My pleasure.

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SCAN LIFE

True Confessions and Lessons Learned (Mostly)

By Brian Murray, CECS, President, Providet Service Associates Inc.

Writing a technical article to an audience of experts in the field you are writing about is a difficult task. I thought I would write about incidents in my business that have really happened as each individual story has a lesson we can all learn from, and, I hope, any humor in the article will contribute to our health, safety, and overall well-being. (Laughter can do that.)

The Big Mess

Like many of you, I started my business from scratch and, at the time, knew little about kitchen exhaust system cleaning. I started in 1989, the same year IKECA was formed. I come from a food-service background and worked for a food-service company. I was responsible for managing 17 school districts' food service in northern New Jersey. When I hired a company to clean the hoods, they typically left a big mess, and I thought I could do it better than they did, so I began part time.

Since then, I have heard those words—left a big mess—many times. I have learned it is a relative term. “Big mess” could mean a drop of grease that fell on the floor after the crew left and the service was complete. But to hear the customer tell it, I would be convinced our crew actually went into the facility bringing with them 300 gallons of grease, and they poured it all down the fan shaft through the filters and onto the equipment and floors. Well, because the *customer is always right*, I would relay the customer's message to my supervisor three decibels up from the customer's own loud rant.

Lessons learned: A) You need to treat the customer as if he is always right, but sometimes he really isn't. B) The biggest complaints often come from the dirtiest facilities and the ones that want to pay the very least for the service. C) Be calm with your supervisors and crew—at least until you get a clear understanding of the facts.

The Prestigious Hotel

When you get started in a service business, you will often do anything to bring in jobs, and over time, you form a niche. At one point, we landed what I thought was a big account in New York City. It

was a prestigious hotel near Central Park. Our service was to clean the walls, floors, equipment, and kitchen-exhaust system. It turns out the place was infested with rodents and roaches. The exterminator could not do much because the critters would simply hide in the debris when the exterminator came, and his chemicals could not penetrate the stuff.

My supervisor, Vic, set up the power washer outside on the sidewalk. There was that NYC draft coming in off the street, and because we were using steam, Vic took the precaution of covering the smoke detectors in the hallway. Well, the draft went down the hall and found a detector that was not covered. Off went the alarm! The hotel evacuated, and with sirens blaring, New York's bravest arrived on the scene. I was home in bed when Vic called and woke me out of a dead sleep to say, “The alarm went off. They are evacuating the hotel. I gotta go; here comes the fire chief!” With that, he hung up. (No cell phones, no way for me to call back.)

My heart was still pounding when Vic called me back to inform me that everything was OK, and after covering the exposed smoke detector, he had gone back to work. Ten minutes later, the steam found its way down the hall to still another uncovered smoke detector, and the whole scene was repeated. Vic called me again, and for the rest of the night, I was planning what to say to the hotel manager the next morning.

I drove into New York thinking I would probably be sued for all the business that was lost that night and all the customers who surely got reimbursed for that night's stay and also would receive free rooms at any hotel for the rest of their lives.

But when I got to the manager's office, she apologized to me! She was sorry that our work was delayed twice during the night. She felt that if she had the engineer on-site to turn off the alarm system during our service, we would not have been so inconvenienced. And yes, I was too shocked to suggest we charge more for our inconvenience.

Lessons learned: A) A “big account” is not an account with a big name. It is an account that fits into your niche, pays a fair price for your service, and pays you on time. B) There are far fewer legitimate things in life to lose sleep over than we think there are.

The Cold Night

We got a call in the early days from a restaurant owner who was desperate to get his system cleaned that night or the fire inspector in his town was going to close him down the next day. Don't you love those calls? Even in those early days, I was skeptical about taking on a customer who neglected getting his kitchen exhaust system cleaned for a very long time. They seem to find some fool like me who is as desperate to get work as they are to get it done. So you go to estimate the job except it is more like the customer whittling down your price until you are doing this very intensive job for next to nothing.

The temperature that night was below zero, and the fan was two stories up on the side of the building. After spending an eternity cleaning inside, I went outside, set up my ladder, went up with my power washer on the steam setting, and began cleaning this sidewall fan. I had one hand on the ladder and one hand on the power washer wand. The steam was coming off as a mist in the subzero weather and, unbeknownst to me, was turning to snow and ice on me, on the fan, and on the ladder rungs. At some point, I looked at myself and saw that although I had gone up the ladder in dark brown clothes, I was now dressed in all white. Even my beard and eyelashes were white. I looked like the abominable snowman. I also became aware that I was in a dangerous situation. My gloved hand had frozen to the ladder, and the ladder was completely frozen. I got my hand out of the glove and half slid, half climbed down the ladder to one of my workers.

Lessons learned: A) Charge extra for emergency service, especially when it is a first-time customer. B) No job is worth doing unsafely. C) Don't power wash an outside fan in below-freezing weather.

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