

The Power of “Clean”

Cleanliness says a lot about you and your facility.

By Mark Wright

What is Krikett Perea’s least-favorite time of the day? It’s whatever time she cleans the bathroom. This daily task is no more enjoyable after nine and a half years as onsite manager at Alameda Mini Storage in Denver, Colorado, than the day she started.

Not that she’s complaining. Her demeanor remains perky and positive while discussing this, well, disgusting part of the job. She knows it’s an essential part of keeping the whole facility shining.

Time to Shine

And “shining” is a very important quality to maintain in a retail business. Cleanliness—or its lack—sends an instant

message to every visitor. Clean flashes a “Come on in...this is a safe place...we’re glad you’re here!” virtual welcome sign. Not so clean conveys a not-so-happy state of affairs that self-respecting prospective customers might want to avoid.

According to an April 2007 retail customer study performed by M/A/R/C® Research and National In-Store, “14% of consumers said they would stop visiting a store that was not as clean as they would like, and 29% said they would only visit the store to pick up a few items they could not find elsewhere.”

While that study primarily targeted grocery and drug store patrons, the takeaway message is nonetheless relevant for any business whose survival depends upon its curb appeal and walk-in first impressions.



Indeed, Perea admits that prospective customers have commented on how her place is cleaner than a competitor's. The bathroom, of course, is only one part of the "keep it clean" routine.

"You just have to keep after it," she observes. Cleaning duties take about an hour of her time each day, although some of the outside chores can take longer. She whips out a broom and manually sweeps down the outside areas daily. A few times a year she hires a mechanized sweeper service to do a heavy clean-up—after the leaves fall, after the winter, and following a busy summer.

Customer Perceptions

People can perceive "cleanliness" in different ways. Research sponsored by the National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS) a few years back found that "males noticed dirtiness ('We don't like sticking to the floor') while women notice cleanliness."

One of the best ways to see the power of cleanliness in action might just be to take a road trip in Texas. Find a Buc-ee's store in any of the 18 communities around the state where the outfit does business. Buc-ee's doesn't have customers. It has fans. Raving fans. Fans for whom a clean shopping experience—especially clean bathrooms—is the Holy Grail of retaildom. (Check out the clip from *ABC World News with Charles Gibson* on this phenomenon from November 4, 2009, at <http://abcnews.go.com/video/playerIndex?id=9000050>.)

Buc-ee's wasn't around when Benjamin Franklin quipped that cleanliness is next to Godliness, however, veteran storage managers know that prayer alone is usually no substitute for elbow grease when it's time to make a facility spick and span. Cory Liddiard, onsite manager at Hill Avenue Self Storage in Salt Lake City, Utah, has been mopping and sweeping and vacuuming for 20 years.

He, too, has had customers comment on how clean the place is. "I like to have it looking nice and have all the weeds out of there," he says.

One of his biggest cleaning challenges is leaks. Oil leaks. Food leaks. Honey leaks. And the worst: battery leaks. "Battery acid eats the concrete up," he explains. "It happens a few times a year." He has to scrub it with a cleaner then mix up some concrete and patch the damaged area.

Outsourcing facility cleaning does not seem to be a common practice in the self storage world. Like Liddiard, Alex Thompson, onsite manager at A-AAA Key Mini Storage in Chicago, Illinois, handles the duty in-house. (Well, actually, he delegates this task to the assistant manager.)

"We sweep the halls down and make sure the doors are clean, take out trash, put in light bulbs. It's pretty simple," he says, although "some days seem longer than others. It



Corrosive leaks can present annoying clean-up challenges.

usually takes maybe two hours a day, but requires more time at the first and last of the month when move-ins and move-outs happen." Summertime means more cleaning, he notes, because they get more traffic in the summer.

Prevent Creepy Crawlies

Regardless of the season, one not-to-be-overlooked component of a good cleaning regimen includes regular attention to pest control. Nothing gets a tenant's attention like telltale mouse droppings atop his file cabinet or a trail of ants leading to her box of Christmas cookie molds.

See Clean, page 20

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“It’s an issue with a lot of self storage facilities anywhere in the country,” says Walt Cline, owner of Suwanee, Georgia-based Pro Pest Products. “Most all have a rodent control program, whether they do it themselves or hire it out.”

Cline says facility operators often toss “throw packs” containing rodenticide pellets into empty units, but he cautions that the practice won’t be legal within about two years due to new Environmental Protection Agency regulations. Poisons will have to be contained in tamper resistant bait boxes.

“Even really tight places can get rodents in them,” Cline notes. Mice can be especially difficult to eradicate because they are so much smaller than rats. “They can fit in very tiny holes, the size of a dime or a nickel,” he explains, “whereas a rat needs a silver dollar-sized hole.”

In addition to rodents, various insect groups, like ants and cockroaches, can cause fits as well. “Ants are the most common,” Cline says, “because they live under slabs and pavement, and you can’t really seal them out.”

Another insect culprit to watch out for: termites. “Even though storage buildings are typically made of concrete and metal,” he observes, “people do store boxes and crates and wood that the termites will eat into, along with the office or manager’s quarters.”

Luckily, pest problems tend to slow down some over the winter, Cline notes, so it’s a good time to be proactive and get on top of prevention.



Rodents can squeeze through very small, coin-sized holes.

Attract Virtuous Tenants

A surprising benefit of a clean facility might be higher-minded customers. A study led by Brigham Young University researcher Katie Liljenquist suggests that clean-smelling environments can lead people to be fairer and more generous.

“Companies often employ heavy-handed interventions to regulate conduct, but they can be costly or oppressive,” Liljenquist told online science journal *PhysOrg.com*. “This is a very simple, unobtrusive way to promote ethical behavior.”

Does this mean a few spritzes of citrus-smelling cleaning fluid could reduce late payments and the need for lien sales? Don’t, uh, hold your breath.

Accountability Helps

Worrying about the scent of your cleaning fluid is probably not too meaningful when it comes to achieving reliable cleanliness results. Building accountability into your cleaning regimen, on the other hand, will likely help your facility shine consistently.

Mico Fernandez, onsite manager at an Extra Space facility in Santa Fe, New Mexico, says the company “holds really high standards. Our units are as clean as we can get them, which sets us apart from the competition. We have a list several pages long that covers daily and weekly (cleaning tasks), and we have a mystery shopper that comes and checks on us.”

Using one of the mystery shopping companies listed in SSA’s online vendor directory at selfstorage.org can help make sure a facility is flashing that “Come on in...we’re clean” welcome message.

Looking to go green while getting clean? Visit green-seal.org to search for environmentally-friendly cleaning products.

SSA offers resources to aid in maintenance planning in its *Self Storage Training & Procedures Manual*. Within that manual, the section *Forms and Reports Handbook for a Self Storage Facility* offers a “Monthly Maintenance Checklist,” and the *Self Storage Training & Procedures Guidebook* devotes a whole chapter to “Maintaining the Property.” This publication was authored for SSA by Carol Krendl, and is available via selfstorage.org. ❖