

## **A Guide to Customer Complaints – NCCA Standards & Fair Trading Officer, Lewis Scroby**

It is an unfortunate fact that any carpet cleaner, at some point during their career, will have to deal with a complaint. Whether it be a call-back, an over-expectant customer or problem arising down the line, that undesirable call will be one you have to deal with.

It can be very difficult to receive, accept and attempt to resolve a complaint. But there are methods you can employ to make the process much easier. We find a lot of the time that properly dealing with a complaint can leave the customer just as, or if not more, satisfied than if the cleaning results had been perfect first time.

As you all know, the NCCA offer arbitration services to assist members and customers when a complaint arises. For many years the Association has helped members to resolve disputes and provided assistance and advice to manage and settle potentially strenuous situations and uncompromising customers. I am the current Standards and Fair Trading Officer for the Association and handle all complaints that are reported to the NCCA with assistance from NCCA Director, Paul Pearce, and the other Board members.

Unfortunately it is not always possible to avoid issues that give reason for customers to complain. Much of the work carried out by carpet and upholstery cleaning technicians is judged on expectation, as much as results, and due to over-expectant customers it may be difficult to meet the standards anticipated. One common factor in a lot of complaints that are reported to the Association is that technicians do not 'qualify' with their customers.

We believe over 75% of complaints reported to the office could be avoided by a simple qualification process before beginning work. The process is very simple and should be followed every time, regardless of the circumstances. There are three important steps: The survey, the conversation and the report. In simple terms, you inspect the items to be cleaned, discuss your inspection with the client and confirm the details in writing. Doing these three things will leave little doubt in regard to what you are cleaning, how it should be cleaned and the expected results (from your own AND the customer's perspective). By carrying out a proper survey and qualifying your findings with the customer both verbally and in writing, the following reasons for complaint can, in almost all cases, be eliminated:

- Pre-existing staining/damage has 'arisen' following cleaning
- The item doesn't look 'like new'
- The item hasn't dried quickly enough
- A certain stain hasn't been removed
- The colour isn't the same as before

On top of this, a thorough survey will reveal any potential problems before they have an opportunity to arise, allowing the technician to take measures to ensure that they don't. Common complaints that are reported to the Association, which a proper survey would uncover and make avoidable, are:

- Shrinkage
- Dye bleeding
- Damage arising from prior excessive wear
- Problems arising due to use of an incorrect cleaning method

It is essential that the above are identified during a survey. These are fundamental issues that may arise during cleaning and can be avoided. If you are unsure you know how to recognise the potential for any of them to become an issue, we would recommend attending a refresher course.

Ongoing training, in general, is highly recommended by the Association and all professional organisations in most industries. It is important for the success of any company to keep up to date with the latest developments within their chosen trade. NCCA tutors continually update their course programmes and teaching methods to ensure the latest methods, equipment, regulations and other developments are covered. We believe all members, whether they have two years or twenty years' experience, should take advantage of this and ensure they are versed on the very latest industry advancements.

It is accepted that even the most experienced cleaning technicians can forget some fundamentals and fall in to bad habits in their process. Regular attendance of courses can ensure that this is kept to a minimum.

Achieving qualifications throughout your career can also be an excellent marketing tool. Presenting clients with evidence of your knowledge and experience, along with the fact that you are continually updating your education, will certainly give you the advantage when they are considering employing a professional cleaner.

The priority in any line of business is always to try to avoid complaints arising. All of the above guidance can greatly assist in this area. However, even the most vigilant and professional technicians can't guarantee a customer will not complain. The key, when a complaint does arise, is efficiency. If a client reports a problem, respond as quickly as possible, react appropriately, listen to them, make an effort to understand and assure them that you will deal with the matter.

Complaints will almost always end up in you losing something, whether it's your time or money (or patience!). This needs to be accepted, it needs to be part of your service. Time and effort spent dealing with complaints is just as important as time and effort spent working, quoting, marketing or any other activity supporting your business. Understand that the customer has also lost these things and one thing you can save is your reputation. Customers are much more likely to spread word about a bad experience than a good one. Bear this in mind. Although a bad situation resolved is also a good story for them to tell.

Putting procedures in place to ensure complaints are properly dealt with is essential practice for any professional company and also ensures that you, and your employees, are prepared to deal with complaints when they do arise. Procedures should include advice on the manner and attitude of the person communicating with the complainant, instructions on exactly what information to collect during the initial reporting of the complaint and guidance on what to tell the customer to ensure that they understand their complaint will be properly investigated.

If you are the one who will be responsible for dealing with the complaint, provide your name and contact details. If not, ensure that whoever will be responsible is furnished with all the facts and communicates with the customer as soon as possible. Having a direct line of contact and being assured that the complaint will be properly dealt with will put them at ease and almost always make them easier to deal with.

Once in the process of investigating a complaint, keep the customer informed. This will reinforce their faith in you and your intention to properly resolve the matter. If there are going to be delays, tell them. They may not like it, but it's far better than them calling you further down the line because they feel ignored.

When talking to a customer who is making a complaint, allow them to speak even if they are shouting. Listen and do not interrupt. You will be surprised how remaining calm and not rising to the potentially high emotional level of the customer can quickly diffuse them and assist in you both understanding the situation much better.

Ask for information in writing, especially if the conversation isn't clear enough. Telephone calls with regard to complaints are often difficult, a customer can be angry, emotional, not thinking straight and this may lead to them not putting themselves across properly or fully explaining the extent of the problem or their view of the situation. Assure them that you have procedures for dealing with complaints and politely ask if they would mind providing you with a written report so you can fully understand their position. If you are unsure about anything after having the conversation and reading the report, offer to visit the premises and check for yourself.

Be honest with your customers but do not admit complete responsibility until you are aware of all the facts. Although it is likely the customer will want you to admit liability you should not directly do so. Although while avoiding this you should make it very clear to the customer that you will fully deal with their complaint.

Avoid using negative words like can't, won't, fault and problem. Rather than explaining what you disagree with and what you can't or won't do, mention what you do understand, offer what you can do. Arguing with your customer will not help the situation at all. Of course you may not agree with anything that they say, you may even feel that they are the ones at fault, but responding in that way will only make things worse. Even if it is clear that their complaint is not justified or valid, remain calm and professional. Whether the customer has a point or not, it is always easier to deal with a matter when discussions aren't heated.

Procedures are a very important part of operating any modern business. Whether it's best practice for the work being carried out, workplace health and safety, office or financial procedures or employee guidance, systems should be in place to ensure that the company is operating to the required high standards. Complaints are no different. Written procedures should be in place to ensure that they are properly dealt with, for the benefit of both the customer and the company.

Most NCCA members have put a lot of time and effort into regular training. Whether it's the owner or a new technician, the investment in education is considered vital to the success of the company. Adding that to the fact both recommendations and word-of-mouth are very important aspects in obtaining work and repeat bookings, it is surprising that some members do not put the same level of effort into dealing with complaints. Especially situations that could have quite an effect on reputation and the chances of being recommended for further opportunities.

All companies, even one-man bands, should have written procedures for dealing with complaints. It should not be considered a waste of time to respond to a concerned customer, even if you disagree with their side of the dispute. However, a lot of time can be wasted if a complaint is not managed properly. Following a specific set of guidelines will ensure that issues are dealt with efficiently and professionally.

Complaint procedures should include: instructions on communicating with a customer, the investigation process, how the company will address any issues, resolution options and reviewing/developing company policies to avoid the problem reoccurring in the future (this applies even if the customer is not fully justified in their complaint). Consider the reasons they felt the need to report the matter to you. Beyond any technical concerns, did communication or the way the company advertises, for instance, lend weight to the complaint?

Once you have put time into a proper complaint procedure, use it. Anything that you have made an effort with to assist customers should be used to promote the professionalism of your company. A proper written procedure for dealing with complaints shouldn't be filed away until an issue arises. These things can be excellent marketing tools. If you have a complaint procedure you are proud of and are confident in, promote this to your customers. Something like this which puts their mind at

ease can greatly assist your chances of success turning a quote into a booking. You can also use this to put off those customers that may want to 'try it on' (more on these later).

Terms and Conditions are other things customers should be made aware of. It is surprising how many times the NCCA has been involved in a complaint and found a company has directed its customer to their online or printed T&C's, but only after an issue has arisen. If you have specific terms or require customers to comply with certain procedures or deadlines, you must make them aware of these at the relevant time (usually at the quotation stage, or at least before any work is scheduled to be carried out). It is very difficult to use a term or condition as a reason not to respond to a complaint if they have only been brought to the attention of the customer once the issue has been reported. At this point they will just be considered an excuse or 'get-out clause' and the customer will lose faith in you and the company - probably only making the matter worse or the customer more determined to pursue a resolution.

Terms and Conditions can be a very important part of a company structure and, when used correctly, assist with operational efficiency and customer relationships. Unfortunately when not used correctly, or revealed too late, they can become useless.

If you don't want complaints you need to act to avoid them arising. The previous articles focussed heavily on surveying and qualifying with customers before commencing any work. On the technical side, problems can almost always be avoided by carrying out a thorough pre-clean inspection. If you come across a blue twist-pile wool carpet and have cleaned 1,000 blue twist-pile wool carpets without any problems, it does not mean that this one will be the same. Test, inspect, survey, investigate, question, record, and review. Find out everything you possibly can about the item before you start. It is guaranteed to reduce the number of complaints you may receive.

Carrying out a thorough pre-clean survey should ensure that any potential problems that may arise during cleaning are identified. These can then be brought to the attention of the customer. We have received many reports in the office of members taking on work despite knowing that there may be difficulties during, or following, the cleaning. A common situation is a member explaining to a customer that there is a risk, the customer making a verbal agreement for the work to be carried out regardless, and then making a complaint once the issue has arisen. Verbal agreements aren't guaranteed to negate complaints. It will always be one party's word against the other.

Written statements are much more secure when it comes to concerns about cleaning results and potential damage. Many members use liability waivers (essentially written statements clarifying that a risk has been identified during the survey and there is potential for a problem to arise if the item is cleaned). Customers can agree for the technician to continue work despite the risk and would sign the waiver to confirm this.

Liability waivers can prove to be valuable if the identified problem does arise, but it is important to understand the distinction between an unavoidable issue arising and a problem arising due to negligence or inefficiency on the part of the technician. Waivers are very useful for addressing potential complaints and educating clients before starting work, but they should not be used to evade liability if the customer has genuine reason for complaint.

Another difficult situation members have found themselves in is what's become known as the 'Last person to touch it' scenario. Essentially, if damage or staining is present on the item following a clean, and no evidence can be provided to prove this was pre-existing, the last person to 'touch' the item (ie. you, the cleaner) is liable. Unfortunately hindsight will not help anybody in this situation. A pre-clean survey is vital and a liability waiver may also be required to ensure you do not become a scapegoat and accountable for the damage.

Many members have come unstuck because they agreed to carry out work despite their awareness of a problem or the potential for a complaint. It is important to remember that you do not have to clean anything. It is upon you to decide whether the reward will be worth the risk. If you come across an item that will be difficult to clean, is already damaged, or you are unsure about meeting the customer's expectations, then you have the option to NOT take it on. Thank the customer for considering you, explain your concerns and politely refuse the work. They may not appreciate your position, or argue and insist that you proceed, but ultimately if you aren't sure you can, it is not advisable to try.

Members use a wide variety of methods to advertise their company and services. Marketing is number one on the priority list for many companies when starting and developing their business and the right strategies can be incredibly valuable, ensuring the growth and financial security that is essential to a successful venture. Unfortunately, the flip side is the wrong strategies can be very damaging to reputation and finances. Words and images need to be chosen carefully, offers and incentives considered from all angles and outlets researched and reviewed.

Your Association membership, used together with confirmation of your training, should be enough to convince a customer that you are the right technician for the job. Though there is a limited amount of information you can get across in an advert and the difficulty is in articulating the right things in the right way to interest a potential customer and get them to consider you in the first place.

It is generally understood that customers are rarely fully aware of the reasons they should or should not employ a tradesman. So, strategies are used to entice them and get them to make first contact. Once they have expressed their interest in your services it is much easier to market to them, explain all the benefits of employing you and hopefully confirm a booking.

Members use many different methods to attract customers. Some successful, some not and a select few that have the potential to lead to problems. A relatively common reason for customer complaints does not necessarily relate to something going wrong during or following the cleaning. From a customer perspective it is a broken promise - an offer, guarantee or other declaration advertised by a company and not fulfilled or provided as stated.

If you specifically mention something in advertising, and don't provide or abide by it, even due to circumstances outside your control, you are setting yourself up for complaints. Customers see a service advertised and expect to receive it exactly as stated. If you offer or guarantee something, you have to honour it. If you describe your methods/processes you have to follow them - all of them, every time. If you promise something you are expected to deliver it. If you don't (or can't), your customer has reason to complain.

No situation can be completely understood and with so many variances in the types of jobs taken on, it is vital you don't promote things you may not be able to provide. Best practice is not to make specific promises or guarantees at all. Some regularly used offers and incentives which can set you up for problems are listed below:

- Best cleaning results or it's free - Results will be subjective. You may clean a carpet to the best of your ability and be delighted with the result only to find the customer disappointed and expecting no charge. If you work a miracle on an irreparable carpet and your customer expected it to look like new, this guarantee will be used against you.
- All stains will be removed - If there are any members that can confidently guarantee to completely remove any stain they may come across regardless of the circumstances, we would be very grateful for their secret.

- Carpets will be dry in ... hours - With the variances in fibre types, cleaning methods, indoor atmosphere and weather, drying times can be greatly affected and almost impossible to accurately predict. Although it is a concern many customers have, and a guarantee that may assist in converting enquiries, it is recommended to provide general drying times (for instance, 6 - 12 hours).
- Carpet Protector will prevent stains - Although carpet protectors can be proven to prevent solutions being absorbed by fibres, the circumstances of the spillage are uncontrollable. Carpet protector certainly may prevent a stain, but not if a spill is left on the carpet for hours before being attended to. Customers have been very easily convinced that protector offers an impenetrable stain barrier for their carpet, regardless of what is spilt, where and how long it has been present. It is the responsibility of the technician to ensure they are educated on the limitations of protection, as well as the benefits.

Don't over-sell yourself, if anything you should 'under-promise and over-deliver'. This is a quote I have heard many times, particularly from past and present members of the NCCA Board. It is guidance that should be followed and something that would have helped avoid several complaints we have received during my time here.

It is vital for any successful company to track their business. Information can be quickly attained and simply logged for future reference. It is recommended to keep a record of the following:

- Exposure - Where did your customers find your details? This will assist in determining which advertising sources are providing the most referrals.
- Influence - What was it about the company/advertisement that made the customer call? This will provide feedback on your promotional material and which advertising methods or offers/incentives are working.
- Conversion - What convinced the customer to employ your company? We know it is easier to obtain a booking after the initial introduction to a customer. This will help keep a record of the specific reasons the customer felt comfortable taking you on.

Once you are aware of the reasons why customers consider and employ your company, you can start to look at the reasons why you may NOT be considered or booked again. Repeat bookings are staple of most carpet cleaning companies business and keeping customers satisfied will ensure they have you in mind when future work needs to be done.

From my discussions with members, they seem to get a good idea about their customers and whether they would be likely to book again in the future. There will obviously be a lot of customers that never consider booking again - mostly this will be down to not considering regular cleaning a priority or not wanting to pay for the service too often. However, there may be some that have potentially been put off.

Some of the reasons customers will avoid using you again are the same concerns that add weight to complaints. A customer may appear satisfied and pay for the service, but at the same time have it in mind that they won't be employing you in future. It may not be down to anything specific that you have done wrong, but there are several general things you can look at to ensure your professionalism is fully demonstrated.

- Communication - Talk to your client, ensure they are aware of how you plan to carry out the work and give them an opportunity to ask you any questions.
- Attitude - Remember your manners and courtesy. Remain friendly and calm throughout, even if an issue arises.
- Appearance - Ensure you present yourself well and have clean and appropriate attire.

- Equipment/vehicle repair - Clean and fully working equipment will give the customer more confidence in your professionalism.
- Smoking - Avoid smoking on-site or around customers, even if they do themselves.
- Organisation/timekeeping - Survey and schedule work properly to avoid running out of time, have the job information to hand, ensure you arrive when you agreed to (or at least inform the customer if you may be late).

The negative aspects of all of the above have been factors (though not often the cause) of customer complaints received by the NCCA. They are also reasons a customer can lose faith in your service.

It is understood that a dissatisfied customer will tell more people about their experience than a satisfied one. It may be that the cleaning work was to the highest standards, but the customer was put off by something you may feel is completely irrelevant. Although it can be difficult to identify these minor areas to improve upon, especially when customers will rarely point them out, it is important to review things outside of your cleaning services to ensure complete customer satisfaction. This should provide more of the repeat bookings and recommendations vital to every successful company.

Following the previous focus on surveying and inspecting items to identify potential issues, it should be acknowledged that some problems are destined to arise regardless of how much or how well you prepare. As I'm sure you all know, there can be several phenomena encountered during and after the cleaning of even the most standard carpets and soft furnishings.

Patchiness, distortion and many other types of damage have been reported to the NCCA and sometimes there appears to be absolutely no explanation as to how or why it has occurred. In these situations it is important to understand the position that you are in. You may not specifically be responsible for the issue, but you certainly still need to address the matter and ensure the customer is made aware.

Several members have put themselves in difficult situations by not accepting liability for an unexpected occurrence during or following cleaning. We obviously appreciate that unexplained damage and other phenomena can arise without any fault on the part of the technician or cleaning process. Unfortunately, however, these are a risk of the job. You may not have to accept liability, but you do still need to accept that the cleaning process has caused the issue and the customer needs to be appeased.

This is the main reason the Association insists all our members have comprehensive insurance cover. We try to assist all members to become the best cleaner they can be, but also accept that there are some things you can't account for. These unexpected situations can be the most difficult to accept and put right, but the best cleaners will deal with problems as well as they deal with carpets.

NCCA Director, Paul Pearce, has given up a lot of free time (like many former Directors, including John Claydon and Robert Olifent, along with current members of the Board) to assist members in dealing with complaints. Paul is the first point of contact within the Association for technical advice and has helped many companies address, solve and avoid issues with customers.

It is a duty of the Association to assist both members of the NCCA and members of the public when a dispute arises. Often, if there is a complaint from a customer, members will respond accordingly and quickly to resolve the matter. Sometimes, however, these situations escalate and a formal complaint is made to the NCCA. Using the advice in previous articles, many complaints can be avoided or settled before they become disputes but, if the two parties cannot agree, the Association is available to arbitrate.

The complaint procedure that is usually followed is to request both parties provide a full written report on the situation. This is then reviewed in the office and at least one of the NCCA Directors is involved to provide advice. If further information is required, either, or both, parties are consulted and the Association gathers as much information as possible before proceeding with an investigation. Once the issues have all been identified it is important for us to determine whether there was any fault or negligence on the part of the member. If so, we will hold them responsible to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of the customer (within reason obviously); if not, however, we will inform the customer of our position and confirm that we are unable to uphold the complaint.

In some situations it is unfortunately very difficult to determine whether the member is responsible. In these cases we usually try to assist in a negotiation to resolve the matter. Though we always attempt to assist in reaching a reasonable conclusion, sometimes neither party can agree and the matter is taken out of our hands. Disputes almost always become more problematic when parties cannot agree and complaints are harder and harder to resolve as communication breaks down. Remaining calm and professional in these situations (even when a customer is not) is vital in ensuring the complaint does not escalate.

If a member accepts liability for a complaint, or the Association deems them responsible following an investigation, there are very few outcomes in most cases. The three main concluding actions are a refund/compensatory payment, a re-clean or rectification of the problem by the member or another company, or the matter is passed to the member's insurance company who take on responsibility to resolve the matter from that point.

If the Association does decide that the member is responsible, we will always provide a recommendation for how best we feel the complaint should be resolved. This is put forward after consultation with at least one Director, taking in to account their years of experience. Members can decide to resolve the matter in their own way, and this is not a concern providing the customer is ultimately appeased, however, the Articles of Association and Code of Practice provide guidelines for responding to complaints and the consequences of not dealing with them efficiently and professionally. Failure to properly address a complaint can jeopardise membership and ultimately lead to probation or expulsion from the NCCA.

In most cases this is not a concern and we find members are responsive and focused on dealing with any issues. It is only when there is a dispute as to whether the member is responsible or liable that things can become more difficult. In these situations the matter can escalate and be taken out of the hands of the Association. We never like to see a complaint reach a legal position, but if the two parties cannot agree it is sometimes the only option. The NCCA can arbitrate and hopefully assist in resolving a complaint, but if one party decides to take legal advice this is beyond our authority and we can only advise that the other party do the same. It is rarely something we would recommend to members, as the legal process is time consuming and can be very expensive but, if the customer does not agree with the Association's position and decides to employ or seek the advice of a legal professional, the only option is to do the same.

This is one of the key reasons the Association has, for many years, offered a legal helpline scheme to members. Telephone advice is available free as part of the benefits of NCCA membership, and covers complaints, employment, health and safety, financial issues and many other areas where an expert may be needed to clarify where you stand and what options and recommendations can be provided from that position.

Insurance companies are also there to assist in these situations. Do not avoid talking to them for fear of being penalised financially. Until you make a claim you are not liable, but it can be very difficult to determine if a complaint will warrant the involvement of the insurance company. They are the



experts. If a problem is too much for you to handle, or you aren't sure what to do, talk to them. Insurance is one of the largest essential outlays for small businesses, ensure you make full use of it.

In the past we have had members report that they were losing sleep and concerned about their health when dealing with particularly stressful complaints or customers. We appreciate that these situations can be very difficult and there are unfortunately some very stubborn and even malicious people out there. Principles are very important within professional companies and sticking by them is obviously of great value, both personally and in terms of business. Sometimes however, it is better to bite the bullet.

We often find the reasons members haven't resolved a complaint prior to it being reported to us are financial. We would never advise a member to compensate a customer without confirmation that they were at fault for a complaint, but there have been occasions where even the members would agree that a refund cheque would have been preferable to a lengthy dispute or legal action. Weighing up the costs in your time, finance and reputation against what would be considered undeserved recompense can quickly change opinions. Even when it isn't justified, there can be occasions when it is more beneficial to resolve a complaint in the easiest way rather than the fairest way.

A common occurrence when disputes arise with difficult customers is that the member expected there would be a problem. There have been several complaints reported to the office that came as no surprise to the member because they 'had a bad feeling about this customer' from the start. It is an unfortunate fact of life that some people will try to get something for nothing and we are quite aware that there are what can be considered 'professional complainers' out there.

Some members have unfortunately been 'trapped' by customers in the past. If you do end up in a situation whereby a customer is being unreasonable and appears to be looking to gain something (a refund/free clean, new carpet, etc.) your procedures for dealing with this should be exactly the same as a standard or justified complaint. You may disagree with everything they are saying, but remaining professional is the best way to ensure the matter doesn't escalate and can be quickly and properly dealt with.

Remain calm and listen to their claim (no matter how ridiculous - believe me, we've heard them all), respond accordingly, ask for a written report if it will help. Don't argue or rise to aggressive levels of communication, even if the customer does. Focus on procedure, you'll be amazed how easy it is to respond to even a completely unjustified complaint when your answers are part of a set process. This also allows you to be reassuring without committing to meet their potentially exaggerated expectations for a resolution.

The fact you have procedures in place can assist in general. Informing your customer that you take complaints very seriously and follow a specific investigation process may put some people off pressing their baseless claims. Involving the Association can have a similar effect with would-be complainers. If they are informed their grievance can be passed to a professional organisation who will arrange a thorough review if they can provide a full written report, those that can't justify their position can be instantly put off.

One of the benefits in this industry is you get the opportunity to review the situation, and also the customer, before committing to the job. Another reason pre-clean surveys and on-site quoting are important is you can determine what (and who) you are dealing with before the work has started and you are stuck with the contract. If you have a concern about a customer or the potential for a complaint to arise, there is always the option to walk away.

Many of the most experienced cleaners are sure they have avoided complaints by simply turning down the opportunity to do a job due to a gut feeling that the customer will not be satisfied or is looking for an opportunity to 'try it on'. Tell-tale signs in their initial enquiries can sometimes help in identifying the potential of this happening (if their first question is regarding your insurance cover rather than your service for instance).

If you get the inkling that a customer might be a problem, you can ensure the potential for making a complaint is minimised by following standard procedures. Complete a written survey, provide terms and conditions, have them sign to confirm they understand anything you have brought to their attention and carry out all your cleaning processes to the NCCA standard. These are things that members should be doing on every job, but have often been lacking when complaints are brought to our attention.

Customers aren't the only concern of course. Sometimes you'll see an item and know instantly that there is a major risk in cleaning it. Although we know a lot of you want to tackle everything you come across and have worked many miracles in your time, there will be some things that are beyond saving and some customers that are at the ready when things don't go your way.

If you are confident you can get a result, by all means go ahead but make sure you properly prepare and cover yourself. Carry out a full survey and pass the results to the customer in writing - ensuring that they are well aware of the risks and potential consequences (consider a liability waiver if it would provide more peace of mind), follow best practice, take care in what you're doing, inspect before and after and communicate with the customer throughout. Many of these are, again, things that should be fairly standard practice on every job.

If it goes well then that's great, if not there should be no reason for recourse from the customer. We've even found that clients are highly appreciative of the warnings and can learn a lot from the pre-clean processes and survey reports.

## Summary

- Have a written complaints procedure that you and others can follow to ensure matters are properly dealt with every time.
- Minimise the risk of complaints by following standard procedures on every job. Adhere to PAS 86.
- Talk to your customers. Ensure they are aware of what you're doing and what can be expected and take the opportunity to raise any concerns you may have yourself.
- Listen to your customers. Take in what they tell you. What are they most focused on in terms of results? Have they said anything that worries you?
- Don't be afraid to turn down a job if you have a concern about a customer or the items that need cleaning.
- Schedule your day to avoid running out of time. Add extra time for jobs you know may be more difficult.
- Arrive when you agreed to or inform the customer if you may be late.
- Survey. Every time. Identify the carpet, look for damage and deterioration, check for fitting issues, test colours, record everything in writing.
- Qualify. Ensure you're customers are made aware of your survey results and anything that may affect the way the items will be cleaned or the potential results.
- Make the customer fully aware of any risks the cleaning process may present. Consider a liability waiver if there is the potential for any damage to arise. Verbal agreements are inadvisable.

- Clearly bring your terms and conditions to the attention of the customer before starting any work. Make sure they are informed of anything you need them to be aware of and get them to sign an acknowledgement if required.
- Implement a continuing education system. Stay up to date with developments in the industry.
- Regularly review Health and Safety regulations and your own H&S procedures.
- Keep your equipment and vehicle clean and in good working order.
- Don't smoke on site.
- Follow any and all recommended processes when cleaning. Especially if you list procedures in your advertising.
- Don't over-sell yourself. Under-promise and over-deliver.
- Avoid guarantees. It is very rare you can be sure of every detail.
- If you aren't getting many repeat bookings, look into reasons why customers would not want you back. It may be they were happy with the cleaning but something else has put them off.
- Undercharging. If you can't spare the time to deal with a problem or refunding the price of your cleaning will not cover the cost of rectifying a simple mistake, you need to review your pricing structure.
- When responding to complaints, always deal with facts rather than opinions or assumptions.
- Remain calm, even if your customer is not. Try to diffuse, rather than escalate, a dispute.
- Never argue. Listen to the customer. Allow them to speak without interrupting (even if you don't agree) and wait for your opportunity to respond.
- Ask for information in writing to assist your understanding. This is also useful if a customer is confrontational in discussion or face-to-face.
- Don't ignore complaints or complainers. They will never go away and it will only make matters worse.
- The NCCA Code of Practice includes guidelines and timescales for dealing with complaints.
- You can be assuring without committing to meeting the demands of a complaining customer. Focus on your process for dealing with the matter rather than what the outcome will be.
- Keep the customer informed, especially if there will be delays in responding.
- A free legal helpline is provided for members if a customer threatens action via a higher authority.

The NCCA is always available to assist when a complaint arises. You can contact us for advice or simply discuss a scenario to help your understanding and options for dealing with the matter. Our arbitration service can be offered to customers, but always try to resolve a situation yourself. By following the above advice you should be in a good position to properly respond and address any complaint and hopefully avoid many arising in the first place.