

# HAPPILY EVER AFTER!

*Hiring a house cleaning service is supposed to make your life easier, not more difficult. The relationship between client and server should be a "win-win" alliance, and here are some tips for making it so.*

## Finding Good Help is a Major Challenge.

Whether you're managing a business or simply your household, you know how true that old cliché still is today. And when you do find good help, there is an even greater challenge in keeping it.

When it comes to hiring anyone in the service business — be it a plumber, electrician, or whatever, it's amazing how hard it sometimes is to reach someone. Have you noticed how long it takes for some service providers to get back to you when you leave a message — if they ever bother calling you back at all?

Use the responsiveness in your initial inquiry as a gauge of what to expect in the future. Any house cleaner, be it an individual or a company, should get back to you within a reasonable time. The promptness — or lack thereof — should serve as a signal with respect to the kind of reliability you might expect should you decide to hire this individual or company.

Good help is hard to find. It's even more difficult when recruiting help is not your full time job, as it is with professional house cleaning companies. Furthermore, background checks and criminal history investigations are more difficult for

private individuals to undertake than for companies who have developed and utilize a systematic screening process in connection with their hiring practices.

Hiring a reliable cleaning company (instead of trying to find an individual house cleaner), which in turn bears the burden of finding, training and managing its help, can relieve you of that ordeal. Another side benefit in choosing a company over an individual house cleaner is that a reliable company will take care of its personnel's social security taxes and accept responsibility for workers' compensation claims — resulting in less hassle and added peace of mind for you.

## Define the Job

When interviewing a potential cleaning service, it's important that both you and your cleaner clearly agree on what will be included for the quoted fee. Generally, your house cleaner is not responsible for "daily" clutter chores, like picking up after the kids, washing dishes or cleaning Fluffy's litter box. The general description of the job is "house cleaning", and you need to determine up front exactly what this description includes on each visit.

It will be far easier for both you and your house cleaner when the

expectations are spelled out and mutually understood right from the start.

## Be Prepared to Pay a Fair Price

You work hard for your money, and you deserve to get the most for whatever you choose to spend it on. However, the old adage that says "any man can make something cheaper and sell it for less, and he who considers price only is this man's lawful prey" is certainly true when it comes to getting good value from your house cleaning service.

There are many factors that go into calculating a fair price for cleaning your home, both initially, as well as on an ongoing weekly or biweekly basis. The major cost to a cleaning service is labor, the cost of acquiring, training, supervising and paying a qualified and professional work force. You can't attract or keep quality people with minimum wage pay — not in the cleaning industry, or any other type of business. Yet, labor is only one of the costs that cleaning rates must cover.

In addition to payroll costs, your cleaning service has other overhead expenses: transportation to and from your home, payroll taxes, including FICA, FUTA and state unemployment taxes, supplies and equipment, marketing expenses, office and administrative costs, workers compensation, bonding and general insurance costs — just to name a few. It is not unusual for it to cost your cleaning company \$30 or \$40 just to get a team to your home — before they even start cleaning it!

On top of all that, the company is entitled to expect a small profit of \$10 or \$15 per cleaning visit, an amount you surely shouldn't begrudge them.

The really important factor relative to your cleaning fee is that you get good value for your money — and that should be more than just a good cleaning job.

## What Determines Good Value?

Obviously, since you're paying for "house cleaning", you expect a good cleaning job. Your expectations relative to what was agreed upon at the beginning of your relationship with your house cleaning service should be fulfilled. But the overall value is determined by more than just a clean home on every visit.

If you hire someone who agrees to clean for you every Wednesday, but can't be depended upon to show up faithfully on the agreed-upon day, it really doesn't matter how good a cleaning job that person or company performs. It does not make your life easier when you've got company coming and you arrive home from work to find out that your house cleaner failed to show up that day!

Knowing that the folks to whom you entrust your home and valuables have been screened, bonded, professionally trained and supervised can give you greater peace of mind — certainly a major element in making your life easier. A reliable cleaning company would never assign anyone to clean your home to whom they wouldn't entrust their own.

Accidents can and do happen, and when they do, "good intentions" may not cut it. Many house cleaners do not carry workers' compensation or general liability insurance. What happens if a cleaner slips and falls on a wet floor or while cleaning a bathtub? What happens if your house cleaner accidentally breaks a valuable family heirloom? Knowing that your cleaning service is responsible enough to carry the proper insurance and legally required workers' compensation coverage is important to your peace of mind.

## Effective Communication Makes Everyone's Life Easier

A major cause of misunderstandings that lead to dissatisfaction in the relationship between client and house cleaner is a lack of communication. Communication is a two-way street, and since you may not be home on most occasions when your cleaning team visits, "written" communication is important. Certainly, leaving a note to express a concern or register a complaint is important. But it's equally important that you periodically communicate your written appreciation for good service. House cleaners respond well to compliments just like anyone else. In fact, the old saying that "honey attracts more flies than vinegar" is indeed true.

People like to be recognized, and written compliments can go a long way in motivating the folks responsible for looking after your house cleaning chores. Use written notes to convey special requests or to address specific concerns. But also

look for opportunities to inspire your cleaning people with positive comments as well. You might be surprised how far this gesture will go in motivating your cleaning team to go that extra mile.

When your cleaning team leaves you a note, it also shows that they care about you and your home.

## Special Requests

Your cleaning team is responsible for cleaning several homes each working day. While they will be happy to accommodate special requests you may have from time to time (such as cleaning the oven, inside the refrigerator, and washing windows, for example), it will be easier for them to accommodate your wishes if you provide them with advance notice.

Rather than leaving a note asking them to do an extra assignment today, call the office in advance or leave a note asking them to do the task on their next regular cleaning visit. In this way, your team can plan their day's cleaning schedule ahead of time. As you can appreciate, if two or three clients surprised them with extra duties on their scheduled day, they may have to skip someone else's regular visit if they tried to fit in that extra work.

Keep in mind that you will normally be expected to pay a little extra for work that is not normally included. That is only fair, after all.

## Your Cleaning Schedule

Most cleaning services work five days a week, Monday through Friday. That means that they need to clean approximately 20% of their clients each day. Obviously, not everyone can be cleaned on Friday. Of course, not everyone wants to be — and for good reason. Monday, for example, is an excellent day to schedule your cleaning because it means the house gets spiffed up after the weekend and you get to come home to a cleaner home all week long. Then again, your cleaner can't clean everyone on Monday, either.

A factor that may determine your specific cleaning day is the weekday on which a cleaning team is already in your area. If your cleaners are already cleaning several homes in your neighborhood on Wednesday, then that is likely to be your assigned cleaning day. It is not economically feasible to send a team several miles out of their way when they're working in another part of the city on Tuesday, for example, if there is a team in your neighborhood on Wednesday.

It's also important to understand that while your house cleaner may be able to tell you whether they will be at your house in the morning or afternoon on your scheduled day, it is virtually impossible to set a specific time of arrival. They can't drop what they're doing before they're finished at the Brown's house in order to get to the Jones' house by 10:30 AM, for example. What is important is that if they promise to come on Thursday, then you have every reason to expect them to show up sometime on Thursday — and that is important.

## Cancelled Appointments

Just as it might make your life miserable if your cleaners did not show up without notice for a scheduled visit, it is equally frustrating for your team to arrive only to find that you "forgot to call and cancel" this visit. For this reason, your cleaning company may have a policy of charging clients who fail to provide advance notice in canceling a cleaning visit. Conversely, if your team fails to show as scheduled, you may have an equal right to some type of recompense — like a reduction on the price of their next visit, for example. Of course, emergencies can arise which may make it impossible for one party or the other to keep a scheduled appointment. Since those types of emergencies are rare, empathy on the part of the offended party should be the order of the day. It would be a real shame to ruin an otherwise good relationship between you and your house cleaner as a result of circumstances beyond anyone's control.

Ask your cleaning company about their "no-show" policy.

## Security Issues

Since most clients are not home when their house cleaners visit, there must be some way for the team to gain entry into the house. The majority of clients provide their cleaning company with a house key — which a reliable company will treat with the utmost security. Besides management, only the team supervisor should have access to clients' keys. Leaving a key under the

front doormat, in a mailbox, or some other location is not a safe alternative.

If you're not comfortable giving your cleaners their own key, and there's a chance you won't be home when they arrive, you need to have some agreeable and viable alternative for allowing them entry into your home. Being "locked out" for a scheduled cleaning visit is a very good reason for the company to insist on charging a missed-appointment fee.

Professional house cleaning companies pre-screen prospective employees prior to sending them out into clients' homes. A background check that discloses impeccable honesty and integrity is critical to the screening process. The standards demanded of applicants and employees of your cleaning service may indeed be higher than those required by firms employing people in the security field.

One lesson we learned from The Bible is that even "perfect" humans can give way to overwhelming temptation. If Adam and Eve would chance eternal damnation over an apple, it stands to reason that we should not tempt lesser mortals with a "karat"! Never leave jewelry or cash where it can be easily accessed by anyone.

## Accidents

Accidents can happen, even with the most careful of house cleaners. Most often they occur because the homeowner fails to notify their cleaners about "booby traps" that may be present: the lamp shade that collapses if you merely look at it wrong — the picture that's hanging by

a thread which falls off the wall the minute the dusting person touches it. Be sure to advise your cleaning service about any such potential perils that may be present in your home.

Many client/house cleaner relationships are terminated when something in the home is broken and the "good intentions" of the cleaners aren't enough to pay for the damage. It's important that your house cleaner be adequately insured, including a provision called "care, custody and control" (which all insurance policies specifically exclude, and which must be written into the policy as an addendum). Insurance is a substantial expense for those responsible house cleaning services who carry it, but it's worth the peace of mind to you to pay a little more for a service that is properly insured.

Damage to household objects is one thing, but it can be far more serious (and costly) if someone is injured on the job. Your house cleaner could slip and fall on a wet floor or while cleaning a bathtub, and that's why it's also important that your cleaning service cover its employees with required workers' compensation insurance. You might be surprised — indeed, shocked — by the increased premium in your homeowners' policy if someone is injured on your property and a claim is made against your insurance company for bodily injury and/or medical expenses.

A major cause of injury to house cleaners occurs during winter months when they attempt to enter a client's home with ice-covered walkways or steps. Show common courtesy to your cleaning team by making sure that outside steps and

entryways are safe to walk on and that a path is always shoveled through the snow on your established cleaning day.

## Pets

Family pets can pose a problem for the house cleaner who doesn't know whether the big, barking dog is excited *friendly* — or excited *angry*. Should Fluffy the cat be let in (or let out) by the team? If Fido has been locked in a room, you don't want the cleaner to drop dead of a heart attack when she opens the door, only to be greeted by a lunging Rottweiler!

If possible, leave your pets outside on your cleaning day. It's a lot easier to clean the house without the cat chasing the mop or having the dog freak out when the vacuum cleaner is turned on. If pets will be in the home when your house cleaners arrive, be sure that they have been warned ahead of time — like, "don't let the cat

out when you come," or "don't worry about Rex's barking."

## Tipping

For those working in the service industry, be it as a waiter, taxi driver, bellman, hair dresser, manicurist, parking attendant or a house cleaner, tips are always appreciated. It is appropriate to tip your house cleaners when deserved. While 15% to 18% is considered the norm for good service in most industries, 10% of the cleaning fees is generally deemed appropriate for house cleaners. However, the decision as to whether to tip and how much to leave is entirely a personal matter; it is not a mandatory obligation.

Should you choose to leave a gesture of appreciation for your cleaning crew, a gift of cash rather than a check is the practice preferred by most house cleaners.

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## NOTE:

This booklet can be edited to include the specific policies of your company as needed. It is designed to be left with a customer at the time of your initial cleaning consultation or by the team leader on the first cleaning visit. Our experience over the years has been that this booklet can set the stage for a good relationship between your company and your clients and avoid misunderstandings and reduce client terminations.

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