

# Technical Bulletin

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## QUALITY AND SERVICE Are You A Quality Cleaner?

Put this question to the vast majority of cleaners and very few would not make a positive response. However, after a period of many years, and following well over a thousand in depth quality audits in unit shops and factory operations, many cleaners would be horrified to see the blatantly obvious nature of some faults on garments awaiting collection that have been observed. This is not to say that cleaners do not make a real effort to establish good quality standards, most do, but do not have the essential systematic inspection procedures in place at all the critical stages in the process, to ensure the highest quality standards are achieved.

It is worth considering the impact that serious faults can have on your business revenue. Taking the case of a regular customer who has had their garment returned with an obvious stain that had been pointed out at reception on depositing the item; no explanation has been given for the unsatisfactory result on collection. The customer may be so disappointed that they then take the garment to a competitor who removes the stain making sure to inform the customer how easy it was! The original cleaner is unlikely to know why the regular customer was lost. Most cleaners will be familiar with this kind of scenario many having had garments returned to them from a competitor. **Being realistic we need to ask ourselves how many of my complaints are my competitors receiving?**

## Making A Start So how do we go about raising standards?

The first step is to establish what we mean by "Quality" There are many definitions such as "a degree or level of excellence" and there are of course the ISO quality management systems. From the point of view quality this represents not just our standards of cleanliness and cleaning, spotting and finishing but the overall level of service we deliver to our customers as high standards of cleaning. Stain removal and finish are unlikely on their own to promote ongoing improvements in turnover.

Untidy, poorly trained counter staff can, on their own, can lead to a serious loss of business and for some cleaners there is also a need to take a long hard look at their shop front. A drycleaners/wet cleaners shop must look like a place where clothes are cleaned!

Unfortunately some do not meet this simple criteria and many potential customers may be discouraged from entering by the outward appearance of their premises. It comes down to this if our shop is not clean and bright how can our customers be confident that we are competent to clean their clothes?

We are in the appearance business and if you really want to know how to sell cleaning services go and take a look at the cosmetics counter in almost any major high street store. The staff are all selling their products in terms of their personal appearance - we need to take a leaf out of their book.

## **Inspection Inspection Inspection**

The key to improving quality standards is a wholehearted commitment on the part of the staff coupled with the establishment of detailed systematic inspection methods throughout the process. It goes without saying that to produce good quality work production staff must be competent, skilled and well trained. Garments should be thoroughly inspected at the following stages:

1. Inspection at the counter on receipt of the item.

Ideally every received garment should be systematically inspected before the customer leaves the shop, with defects such as stains/soiling, missing buttons, pulled seams, fabric damage and colour loss being brought to their attention. During very busy periods this may not always be possible and in these circumstances the customer should be told that the garment will be carefully inspected before cleaning and if there are any issues you will contact them before proceeding. Always check zip fasteners at the counter – this can make the difference between the customers paying for a new zip or the cleaner paying if the customer claims it was broken in cleaning.

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Counter staff should check the pockets but this can be a controversial issue as pocket checking in some larger establishments is primarily the machine operator's responsibility. Some cleaners don't check at the counter to avoid embarrassment if certain items are found, others ask the customer to check, while others inspect all pockets and where possible pull out the linings to ensure any lint or debris is removed. The latter procedure is preferred because it enables the cleaner to offer repairs if linings are found to be worn out or damaged also cash etc can be immediately returned to the customer, and it gives time to set up a good rapport with your customer.

At the same time, in the case of high value and designer items, the cleaner should, at this stage, establish the value with the customer so that an appropriate charge can be made or cleaning declined if the risk/value relationship is unacceptable. High value/designer knitted items should always be measured to ensure they are finished to the correct size – remember customers can change shape as well as garments!

In the case of household items the customer should be informed that there can be a risk of up to 3% shrinkage/relaxation.

## **2. Examination before cleaning**

Again dependent upon the size of operation all parts of every garment should be systematically inspected on a table prior to wet cleaning. The table should be at least 92cm x 122cm (3ft x 4ft). It is the operator's responsibility to internally check all pockets and in cases where counter staff have pulled out linings the operator should check any where the linings are not exposed. The inspection procedure should ensure that every garment is looked at all over with particular attention being paid to check that any damage has been recorded and that jacket linings etc are checked for pens which may have found their way through small holes in pocket linings. Pen ink can cause all sorts of problems, not just on the garment but on others within the machine load.

Buttons should, if appropriate and where possible, be protected and any lint in trousers with turn ups be brushed out. Where necessary sensitive trims should be removed or protected. Stains and soiling should be removed or pre-spotted as appropriate with particular care being taken to ensure pre-spotting detergents or chemicals are not inadvertently transferred to sensitive items. To reduce the risk of greying, colour transfer, marking off and linting operators should classify into at least 'Darks' 'Mediums' 'Lights' and 'Whites' while also having suitable groups for silks, delicate items and household. Where necessary, knitted items and 'silks' should be bagged (put into a net bag).

## **3. Examination after cleaning**

Experience has repeatedly shown that where cleaners inspect all garments when removed from the machine that invariably their stain removal on garments awaiting collection is better than those who do not!

The cleaned garments should be looked at all over on a table. Inspection at this stage is particularly important as some remaining stains such as albumin stains that remain after cleaning may well be heat set in finishing if they are not removed at this stage.

It is recommended that any lint is removed at this point to avoid the risk of disturbing the finish later on in production. Also any minor repairs can be carried out if this is part of the service and paid repairs forwarded. Any buttons damaged in cleaning should be replaced.

## **4. Final inspection**

Thorough final inspection is essential if high quality is to be achieved and maintained. A detailed and systematic inspection procedure covering all parts of the garment should be adopted; a cursory glance is not enough. Final inspection staff must be taught what well finished garments look like and should understand the importance of high standards of finish at focal points such as jacket lapels and the main creases on trousers.

To facilitate final inspection a rotating hook or chain should be provided so that inspection staff can freely rotate items at a convenient height without the need to constantly move the hanger. Good lighting at all the inspection points is essential, ideally in the region of 500 lux. The final inspection procedure should address the following:-

Is the garment clean?

Is the garment stain free?

Is the garment finished to the required standard?

Is presentation satisfactory? (back pocket buttons fastened etc.)

Have additional services such as repairs been carried out?

## **Presentation Specification**

The following specifications were developed following lengthy research into how the finish, the appearance and the functional features of garments could be consistently maintained at a high standard by means of the final inspection procedure.

There will of course always be cases where, due to the design or style of an individual garment, one or more of the presentation points for that garment would not be appropriate.

#### Trousers

Lint removed

No debris in turn ups

Waistband tensioners released

Back pocket buttons fastened

Zips checked and lubricated where necessary

Zips left open

#### Jackets (single breasted)

Lint removed

Un-buttoned

#### Jackets (double breasted)

Lint removed

Inside button and outside top button fastened

#### Coats

Lint removed

Top or most appropriate button fastened

#### Skirts

Lint removed

Waist band tensioners released

Zips checked and lubricated where necessary

Zips closed

#### Dresses

Lint removed

Zips checked and lubricated where necessary.

Zips closed

Where multiple buttons - top button fastened

Where appropriate, advice notes should be attached to the order.

Final inspection is the last opportunity the cleaner has to ensure customer satisfaction. Never underestimate the anger or frustration that can arise if, just before going on holiday a customer calls to collect an item only to find the trousers have not been shortened or for example, an item may be spotlessly clean and well finished but if the zip is jammed – totally useless! (A spray zip lubricant is very beneficial in this case)

Final inspection is a difficult task being a repetitive procedure that requires a very high level of concentration and the constant need to make valued judgements with regard to standards of finish. Often staff and management on final inspection miss the most obvious faults not because they weren't trying but after a time it is easy to look but not see!

A good systematic inspection procedure should ensure that any remaining soiling or stains are identified. This is a quite straightforward black and white situation as an item is either clean and stain free or it is not and if it cannot be improved/rectified an advice note/stain ticket will normally be required. However, with regard to standards of finish inspection is much more difficult as perfection is not a realistically attainable standard and even new garments will all have very minor faults in the finish some of them not so minor!

The inspector therefore constantly needs to assess whether a minor fault can be ignored or needs to be rectified or if very minor faults added together make the item unacceptable.

Finally, if when inspecting items, a fault is found the inspection procedure should be completed to ensure that any other faults or omissions can be corrected in the right order. There is nothing more frustrating or time wasting for production staff than to find that they are cleaning, spotting or pressing an item for the second or third time simply because all the issues were not identified the first time the item was inspected.