

How Do You Run a Contract Finishing Business? Ask Your Dry Cleaner

How a provider treats customers is as important as how it treats the customer's product.

Almost four years ago, I authored a column in this space that was absolutely brilliant—or so I thought. “A Procurement Fable” was its title. With a beekeeping squirrel as its protagonist, the moral of the story was that a customer who drives a supplier's margin to zero may end up with no supplier at all. Reader feedback was abysmal, and one regular reader whose opinion I value greatly even told me it was the worst column he had ever read. Embarrassed, I swore off attempting to use analogies to prove my points.

Until now.

Dry cleaning. For me, the very concept summons thoughts of Jerry Seinfeld schticks. Specifically, his stand-up routine about how you can't get anything clean with dry:

“There must be some liquids back there somewhere. And ‘One-Hour Martinizing?’ Come on! We inspect, examine and scrutinize every square inch of our lives, yet the whole Martinizing charade just goes completely by us without a word. You know what I think One-Hour Martinizing is? I think they just put the clothes in plastic and give it right back to me. That’s One-Hour Martinizing. You can get One-Second Martinizing if you want it.” (“Seinfeld,” 1995)

Hilarious. But I digress.

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time I walked in the door. We always had a bet on one sport or another. When I picked up my clothes, the winner would razz the loser a bit, and we would set the next bet. All for fun. Won was my dry cleaner who then became my friend. He cared about me as a customer, expediting an order if I ran out of shirts or needed a suit cleaned in a day. Even after I moved and his shop was 10 minutes out of my way, I continued to frequent his business. Just like a contract finisher, he was a service provider. He took great care of me, and I rewarded his service with loyalty. One day, out of the blue, he told me he was selling his business and buying a convenience store. After I picked up my last order, I never went back.

In need of a new dry cleaner, I accepted a referral from a neighbor. My new dry cleaner wasn't the friend that Won was, but she cleaned my clothes on time, her prices were reasonable and her location was convenient. While it always bothered me

Ever think about how similar a dry cleaner is to a contract metal finisher?

I've been using one dry cleaner or another for more than a quarter century now. The name of my first one was Won. He was great. He greeted me by name every

a bit that she wouldn't pin my French cuffs back like Won did, and she expected me to pull the collar stays from my

shirts rather than removing and replacing them herself, I put those irritations aside and remained her customer for more than a decade. One morning while getting dressed it occurred to me that I hadn't worn a particular shirt, one of my favorites, in quite some time. I flipped through my closet, but it was nowhere to be found. I asked the dry cleaner if she might have mixed it up and not returned it at some point, and she vehemently denied that this was even possible. Had she said “Gee, I'm not sure. Let me keep an eye out for it,” I probably would have forgotten about the shirt. Instead, she aggressively stated there was no way she could have lost it. Shakespeare's “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” stuck in my head.

Dry cleaners, like metal finishers, don't own the product; they become the custodians of the customer's property for a brief time, service the product and return it to the customer. When the customer says it sent 100 parts and only received 98 back, how does the finisher react?

A while after the lost shirt incident, I noticed the back of another shirt's collar was becoming frayed. I threw out the shirt. Then another came back from the dry cleaner the same way. Perhaps both shirts had been a little old, but I began to wonder. The next week, a nearly new shirt came back with threads hanging from the crease in the collar. I mentioned it to the dry cleaner. Her denial of culpability was even more aggressive than that over the lost shirt. “It's normal wear and tear,” she insisted. On a shirt I had worn three times? By then, I had been using this dry cleaner for more than 10 years. Paying \$2.50 a shirt, several hundred shirts a year, not to mention suits, dress pants, sport coats, etc., I was a virtual gold mine for her business. Rather than acknowledging a potential mistake, she frustrated me enough to send me in search of a new dry cleaner.

What message do we send the customer when we insist there is no way we damaged their substrates or stand on our “two times the price of our service” liability limitation?

Everything happens for a reason. My newest dry cleaner picks up my shirts at my back door and returns them two days later. The staff pins my cuffs, manages my collar stays and bills me once a month. I couldn't be happier.

Friendships, expedited, lost orders, damaged parts, losing the customer over 5 percent of the annual revenue derived from them, pickup, delivery and going the extra mile. How should a finisher treat its customers? Ask your dry cleaner. ■■



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