

MADEBYHAND - THE GREAT SARTORIAL DEBATE

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2010

Stu Bloom on Garment Maintenance

I've almost finished packing my boxes and will be moving in the next few days so things will be quiet for a bit. In the meantime, a guest posting from Stu Bloom from [RAVE FabriCARE](#) on garment maintenance. If you ever had questions about maintenance, garment shine, or those nasty double-creases down your trousers, this may interest you.

I'll be back once I've unpacked in the U.S.

Hi Jeffery:

There are 26,000 dry cleaners in the USA and almost every single one will tell you that they "focus on the details" and "deliver top quality cleaning".

This is, of course, utter nonsense.

Regarding the claim that they "focus on the details", here's the problem: true quality cleaning is not about a few details. It's about hundreds of details. And more specifically, it's the combination of those hundreds of details that produces true quality dry cleaning and true quality shirt laundry.

What I want to know is how can a cleaner claim that he "focuses on the details" when his entire operation is geared to same or next day service? How can a cleaner claim that he "focuses on the details" when your garments are picked up on day 1 and delivered on day 3? And how can a cleaner claim that he "focuses on the details" when he charges \$12.50 or \$20.00 for a two piece suit and \$2.25 or \$3.00 for a laundered shirt?

Regarding the claim that they "deliver top quality cleaning", how is that possible when their entire focus is on pushing more and more garments (quantity) faster and faster (speed) through their "production system"? And how is that possible when they have "production standards" that dictate that each of their pressers produce a targeted number of pieces per hour and when their pressers are paid by the piece?

True quality cleaning involves the right combination of skills, equipment and specialization, and pricing and turnaround that's correspondingly appropriate. Dry cleaning consultant Kenny Slatten said it best in a 2002 article in the *Western Cleaner & Launderer*: Every cleaner thinks that he produces quality work. But most don't have a clue what true quality cleaning is all about.

That having been said, what are some of the hallmarks of true quality cleaning?

Technical skills, equipment and specialization

True quality cleaning is a highly skilled endeavor. Most of my cleaners and pressers (aka finishers) have been with me for 10+ years and were hired for their **TECHNIQUE**, not for their **EXPERIENCE**. One of my best pressers, for example, had less than a year's experience when she joined [RAVE FabriCARE](#).

Jeffery, that's where most cleaners fail: They believe (and they're encouraged by equipment manufacturers to believe) that fancy equipment will compensate for the lack of skill (by the way, we have plenty of that fancy equipment in our 7,500 square foot, state of the art facility). This problem is particularly acute when it comes to pressing. The overwhelming majority of pressers have many years of experience doing the wrong things over and over again. It's almost impossible to retrain an "experienced presser." Bad habits die hard.

On the other hand, when you have someone with great technique you can guide that individual into producing "near perfect" work over a period of years. I'm sure it's much like guiding a tailoring apprentice over the years to the point that you can trust their skills. Tedious but worth it over the long run.

But skilled technicians alone without the right tools and equipment won't be able to get the job done.

At [RAVE FabriCARE](#), we have different finishing stations, equipped with different types of finishing pads, adjusted to different pressures, equipped with hand irons set at different temperatures, and staffed by pressers with different skills, to accommodate different categories of garments and even different types of fabrics within a specific category of garments.

To understand this departure from the industry norm, you must first recognize that ordinary cleaners typically employ only two types of presses in their dry clean operations: pant presses (slacks, trousers and shorts) and utility presses (blouses, shirts, blazers, sport coats, dresses, skirts, sweaters, etc.).

Finally, the right technical skills coupled with the right equipment permits you to specialize. At [RAVE FabriCARE](#), for example, we follow a specialization regimen that's rare in the dry cleaning industry.

At the vast majority of ordinary cleaners almost everyone is a "jack of all trades". The "dry cleaner" presses pants when he's not loading/unloading the dry clean machine. Other pressers interchange constantly between trousers/slacks, sweaters, jackets/blazers, shirts/blouses, ties, formal dresses, etc. etc. The battle cry is loud and constant: get the stuff out the door and pitch in to get the work done, even if you have no idea what you're doing.

By contrast, a true quality cleaner would NEVER permit such cross utilization.

At [RAVE FabriCARE](#), for example, a garment finisher who specializes in slacks, trousers and shorts would never be assigned a sport coat or a dress.

Why?

Because skilled finishing is all about technique. And few finishers -- even highly skilled finishers -- have developed their technique to the point that would allow them to move seamlessly between

different categories of garments. (As I've said before: "technique" does not equate to "experience". Most pressers with many years of experience have zero technique.)

Not only that, but a true quality cleaner has different finishing stations to accommodate different fabrics within a specific category of garments. For example, a garment finisher who specializes in cotton/linen slacks, trousers and shorts would never be assigned a wool, silk, poly, acetate or rayon slacks, trousers or shorts.

Why?

Because cotton/linen pant presses are equipped with a "harder" pad, are adjusted to a higher pressure, are equipped with hand irons set at higher temperatures, and requires a hand finisher with a "stronger arm". By contrast, wool, silk, poly, acetate and rayon pant presses are equipped with a "soft" pad, are adjusted to a negligible pressure, are equipped with hand irons set at lower temperatures, and requires a hand finisher with a "delicate touch".

At a true quality cleaner anything less is simply unacceptable:

Here are some more examples of specialization at [RAVE FabriCARE](#).

- One dry cleaner for cotton and linen garments: one dry cleaner for all other fabrics.
- One presser for cotton and linen trousers/slacks; one presser for trousers/slacks comprising other fabrics.
- One presser is responsible for steaming and blocking all sweaters and knits. That's all she does all day.
- Three pressers hand press all cotton/linen blouses and shirts (that have not been assigned to our shirt laundry).
- One presser presses all sport coats, suit jackets, blazers and coats.
- All formals and wedding gowns go to one presser. She also does all ties.
- One presser presses all bespoke garments and made to measure garments (other than bespoke and MTM trousers and slacks)

At a true quality cleaner, you won't find those common "bang and hang" machine pressing practices typically found at ordinary cleaners: shine; seam, flap and button impressions; moire-like press pad impressions; double creases; wrinkled seams and linings; and other "crimes of fashion".

Instead, your fine garments will be delicately finished. By a skilled garment finisher. The old-fashioned way. By hand. Using a hand iron. Both inside and out. No matter how long it might take.

“Pressing”, as practiced by ordinary cleaners, is such a poor descriptor of the art of finishing. Of course, a skilled finisher must know how to apply pressure to achieve a smooth finish on a linen or cotton. But a smooth, soft, hand-finish, that minimizes the possibility of shine or seam, flap or button impressions, best defines the finest professional finishing.

When you consider the difficulty involved in aligning technical skills, equipment and specialization, I know why your blood pressure rises every time you think "dry cleaner"!

Dry cleaning machine operations

I'll go out on a limb here: you probably wouldn't operate your home washer the way ordinary cleaners operate their dry cleaning machines!

That statement may sound harsh but it's not. Especially when you consider that the vast majority of ordinary cleaners

- mix dark and intermediate colored garments
- mix light and intermediate colored garments
- mix red, black and other dark colored garments
- mix regular and fragile garments
- load their machines to full capacity
- add or inject moisture into their dry cleaning system
- reduce the length of their “wash” cycles
- increase the temperature of their “dry” cycles.

This produces the fastest and cheapest -- and worst -- dry cleaning. What I call “ordinary cleaning.” And what ordinary cleaners call “exceptional” or “award winning” cleaning.

A true quality cleaner will run their dry cleaning machines quite differently from ordinary cleaners.

At [RAVE FabriCARE](#), for example, we always scrupulously sort our garments into at least 5 like-color classifications, and at least 2 fragility classifications. We never add moisture to our dry cleaning fluid to control any possibility of shrinkage. We always under load our machines to ensure maximum soil removal and reduce pilling. We always extend the length of our wash cycles for maximum soil removal. And we always dry at lower temperatures to further control any possibility of shrinkage.

What's more our dry cleaning machines even have completely separate filter systems for light/intermediate colored loads and dark colored loads.

By contrast, the dry cleaning machines at many ordinary cleaners have a single filter system. This means that the dry cleaning solvent or fluid from both their light/intermediate colored loads and their dark colored loads flows through the same set of filters. As a result, some of the dye residue from their dark garments that accumulates in their filters will eventually find its way onto your light/intermediate garments.

The result?

Whites, creams and pastels that are grey and dingy.

Pricing and turnaround

Is there's a strong correlation between the quality of the product your cleaner delivers and the price they charge for that product?

You bet there is.

So if your competitively priced cleaner that tells you that they consistently "focus on the details" and deliver "top quality cleaning" they're being disingenuous. I would call it lying.

[RAVE FabriCARE](#), for example, is not a "competitively priced" or "value-priced" cleaner. We do not offer discounts, specials, coupons or deals. Nor do we offer a two tier pricing system, one price for your "regular" garments and one price for your "fancier" garments.

At [RAVE FabriCARE](#), we deliver extraordinary care for fine garments and household textiles. And we price our services accordingly. This means that we set our prices at a level which affords us the opportunity to concentrate solely on the quality of our work.

As you can probably appreciate from my prior comments about skills, equipment and specialization, setting prices is the easy part. Consistently delivering on our commitment to extraordinary care -- every item, every order -- now that's the complicated part. And that's the difference between true quality cleaning and ordinary cleaning.

Turnaround is one of those topics that really gets my blood boiling.

While every other cleaner is proud -- yes, proud -- of their same and next day service and three day pickup and delivery service, we offer one week service. It's been that way ever since we opened our doors in April 1988.

Why? Because we don't -- and won't -- produce "bang and hang" or "ordinary cleaning".

Bang and hang cleaning or ordinary cleaning essentially involves tossing your garments into a machine, banging them out on a press, hanging them on a wire or wood hanger, stuffing them in a bag with or without tissue, and cramming them on a holding rack or shuttling them out the back door. Believe it or not, this is standard operating procedure at the vast majority of ordinary

cleaners, including many who profess to be high-end cleaners.

Every cleaner is faced with the same strategic dilemma: They can either focus all their resources on consistently producing the finest garment care possible or they can deliver the same bang and hang work offered by 26,000 other cleaners in the U.S.A.

A quick turnaround means that they've made a strategic decision to focus on the latter. I'd go out on another limb here: no true quality cleaner would offer same or next day service or three day pickup and delivery service.

That, Jeffery, is my quick attempt to convey our philosophy on garment care.
