

Cross-Contamination

The following article was forwarded to us from Deb Canada with the following comments:

“Please take a moment to read the attached article on Cross-Contamination. Although it is written with the Building Service Contractor (BSC) in mind, the content will be of interest to you and several key points have been highlighted.

For those of you that have an opportunity to call on the BSC's in your respective territories, there are some interesting ideas that you may want to consider”

Marvin Mauer and Steven Livingstone
Deb Canada

Cross-Contamination

Commercial facilities can be overlooked breeding grounds for disease. How BSCs can create a healthier environment

By Dan Weltin

[Email the CP editors.](#)

Building service contractors typically associate cross-contamination with medical facilities, but they shouldn't overlook another market segment: commercial facilities.

Although BSCs aren't likely to run into monkey pox or severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) while cleaning offices and banks, they'll certainly come up against the likes of influenza and the common cold — afflictions that, combined, cost companies \$15 billion annually in lost productivity, studies show. What would your clients say if you told them you could help get some of their money back?

article submitted by 
Deb Canada

Well, they probably wouldn't believe it. Many customers think the only way BSCs can save them money is by offering services for less money. But a cleaning program designed to properly clean commonly touched objects where germs linger (called "fomites") can reduce the potential for cross-contamination — and, in the process, create a healthier working environment for building occupants. And a better work space equals higher morale and lower absentee rates — overall, a boost in productivity dollars.

Getting customers to accept this type of program, however, may take a little extra persuasion.

"People don't realize how many pairs of hands touch their facility. People don't realize what percentage of their life their employees spend in their office facility," says Jim Thompson, owner, A-1 Building Services, Wyoming, Mich. "It's like your home...you're going to completely clean your house. Why not completely clean your office environment?"

Just the facts

Cross-contamination occurs when people spread germs from one surface to the next simply by touch. How long someone touches a surface doesn't matter; you touch a surface, you've transferred a portion of the bacteria, says Dr. Michael Berry, research professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"Eighty percent of all common illnesses are spread by hand to mouth, nose and eye contact," adds Dr. Charles Gerba, aka "Dr. Germ," professor of environmental microbiology at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

Restroom staples like toilet seats and sinks may first come to mind as the main culprits, but since these items already get a thorough cleaning, objects such as phones, desks, and computer keyboards are actually more contaminated because BSCs don't clean them on a daily basis.

"A lot of BSCs look at office cleaning as very basic — dust, mop and empty trash," says Thompson.

The average desk is home to more than 20,000 germs per square inch — 400 times more bacteria than the average toilet seat, Dr. Gerba's studies show. But the amount of bacteria isn't the scary part: Only 10 to 100 particles of a common cold virus are needed to infect the average person, says Dr. Gerba. Some cold and flu viruses can survive on surfaces for up to 72 hours. A contaminated doorknob, for

example, can affect others for up to three days.

A simple start

BSCs can reduce the number of germs found on these common office items by employing a detailed cleaning program specifically designed to reduce cross-contamination.

“What cleaners do every day and night is vital. Good hygiene practice is crucial to public health, especially in office settings,” says Brian Sansoni, vice president communication and membership, Soap and Detergent Association (SDA), Washington DC.

The first step: BSCs need to be aware of where the germs are. The top five fomites in offices are: phones, desks, water-fountain handles, microwave-door handles and computer keyboards, Dr. Gerba says. The computer mouse, doorknobs, elevator buttons, light switches, staplers, copy machine, fax machine, refrigerator handle and stairwell handrails also are commonly touched items that can harbor high numbers of germs.

Disinfecting with a pre-moistened towel or microfiber cloth with disinfectant can reduce up to 99.99 percent of the germs on each item. Using a cleaner without disinfectant merely spreads the germs around, says Dr. Gerba.

If customers are hesitant about letting the cleaning crew clean their employees’ desks, BSCs can consider selling pre-moistened wipes directly to the clients to be used by their employees, says Sansoni.

Disinfecting common items may seem elementary, but it’s highly effective. Just ask A-1 Building Services’ Thompson. When he first started in the cleaning industry, A-1 serviced medical facilities where cross-contamination reduction already is part of the job description. When Thompson branched into the commercial segment, he brought the same protocols with him.

“Being in medical facilities, we’ve seen the affects of disease and cross-contamination,” he says.

One of Thompson’s early commercial facility clients, a world headquarters for a major manufacturer, was experiencing outbreaks of the flu and colds among their executives and administrative personnel. A-1 was already disinfecting phones on a weekly basis, but the customer asked if Thompson could incorporate more commonly touched items into the disinfecting program and then perform these duties daily. Thompson complied and assigned the

tasks to the light-duty specialist. These tasks included disinfecting phones, light switches, door knobs, handrails, desk tops, exercise equipment in the executive gym, break room and conference areas. By disinfecting more commonly touched objects, the number of sick occupants and sick days taken decreased, says Thompson.

No slacking

When stepping up disinfecting procedures in other office areas, BSCs can't let their guard down in places they may already clean well, such as restrooms.

Cleaning with a color-coded system can help keep germs from spreading by ensuring tools used in restrooms aren't also used in office spaces and public areas. Thompson uses bucketless mops and a new mop head each time he cleans a restroom. He mops other parts of the building with a different head.

After cleaning restrooms, janitors should wash their hands with soap and water or hand sanitizer; wearing gloves is another good safety precaution.

Cleaning crews, however, are not the only people working in the building who need to frequently wash their hands. Occupants themselves play a key role in curbing cross-contamination (see sidebar) and hand washing is a crucial component, especially after restroom use. Forty-seven percent of office workers wash their hands less than the suggested five times a day, and half of that number don't wash their hands long enough, SDA studies show.

"That's why washing doorknobs is so important," says Thompson.

To encourage occupants to wash their hands, BSCs can post signs similar to those seen in restaurants; a helpful reminder of "remember to wash your hands with soap and water" can increase use, says Sansoni.

Soap and towel dispensers should always have sufficient amounts of product readily available. Also, ensure that towel dispensers are dispensing properly. When users reach into a dispenser to unclog towels, they contaminate other towels for future users. Towels hanging in sink-splash zones are also prone to contamination.

Sink-faucet handles present one of the greatest risks of cross-contamination in the restroom. Using touch-free equipment for faucets and dispensers not only cuts down on cross-contamination, but encourages users to wash their hands more frequently.

Cross-Contamination: A tag-team fight

A building service contractor's role in reducing cross-contamination may not be enough by itself to create a healthy work environment for building occupants. Occupants, themselves, also need to join in the fight — and BSCs can tell them how.

“Most times the mind-set with contractors is they're going in at night, cleaning rooms and floors, and they move on. Fact is, keeping offices clean should be paid attention to around the clock,” says Brian Sansoni, vice president communication and membership, Soap and Detergent Association (SDA), Washington DC.

The best way for occupants to help curb cross-contamination is to remember to wash their hands. Hand washing is one of the most important methods of stopping the spread of germs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The SDA recommends occupants wash their hands each time the restroom is used; after using someone else's keyboard or tools; before and after a meet-and-greet activity; after using shared office equipment; after reading newspapers or magazines in the breakroom; and before and after lunch. Also, people need to wash their hands for at least 15 seconds. According to SDA studies, 40 percent of American workers don't wash their hands long enough.

“Cleaners can be a conduit for this type of information,” says Sansoni.

Providing hygiene tips can help put a face on cleaning and strengthen the relationship with a client, says Sansoni. And since you're there to clean, anyway, it makes sense to encourage proper hygiene, he adds.

Sometimes, receiving cleaning education directly from the cleaning crew can be more effective than from hearing it from an employer, says Bob Merkt, owner, Merkt Education Group and Associates, a division of Kettle Moraine Professional Cleaners Inc., West Bend, Wis.

Be creative when presenting information to occupants, says

Sansoni. Put tips on magnets or brochures that are also emblazoned with your company logo. **During flu season, highlight recent news articles and studies.**

Merkt leaves newsletters in the office lunchrooms to reach the building occupants and not just the account representative. Merkt also sends special information to specific departments. For example, it might be beneficial to inform accounting that large amounts of paper clutter can increase dust and allergens.

Other options include sponsoring a section in the client's company newsletter.

The education program can be a hard sell, says Merkt, so keep the information light and give it a human interest to capture the audience's attention.

“[Touch-free equipment] makes people feel more comfortable to wash their hands,” says Bob Merkt, owner, Merkt Education Group and Associates (MEGA), a division of Kettle Moraine Professional Cleaners Inc., West Bend, Wis.

Tough sell

So, what will it take for BSCs to convince their clients not to roll their eyes at such a cleaning program?

During the bid process, spell out exactly what an **emphasis on public health really means**, says Merkt. Some facility managers award contracts based on price or time, so a detailed program that may cost a little more and take more time to complete could fall on deaf ears; benefits such as **reduced turnover, increased productivity and less absenteeism** are not typically associated with cleaning, says Merkt.

But when BSCs take time to explain to the customer what the program entails, it makes a difference, says Thompson. Often, clients aren't aware this type of cleaning can be done in their facility. They also aren't used to seeing BSCs who are concerned about the health of the client's employees.

There's a reason for that: A lot of BSCs don't think about these issues because they're just in the habit of doing what they've been doing for so long, says Thompson.

“In our industry we tend to sell time and appearance instead of the real reason we clean, and that's public health,” adds Merkt.

Controlling cross-contamination in commercial facilities is not a large expense for the BSC, says Thompson. And if they can add these extra services, clients will pay for them, he adds.

Showing that you are concerned about building occupants' health will enhance your company's reputation and sales, and solidify your relationship with the customer, says Sansoni.

"It comes down to relationship-building," he adds. "This day and age, having a customer who knows who you are [and] knows that you care about customer relationships...goes a long way."