

The Need for Rapid Response

Dry cleaners are busy people. I was reminded of this when I attended the Clean Show in New Orleans. I met Sharon Dutcher of Fay's Laundry and Dry Cleaning in Layton, Utah.

We talked about the many hats that an owner wears, and she said something that is so true of our times: "If your hair is not on fire, don't talk to me!"

How did things get so crazy? And when did bodily harm become the catalyst to respond? I know she was just making a point, but I started thinking. It has taken a long time for us to reach this disorganized and chaotic world in which we do business.



Carolyn Nankervis

I'm going to blame some of the current craziness on Just in Time Manufacturing (JIT).

While its roots go back to the cotton gin, Japanese car manufacturer Toyota made a splash by introducing and then advocating JIT manufacturing during the 1950s. The move was hugely beneficial to the fledgling Japanese auto industry. Inventory was slashed, and costs were realized closer to the point of sale; it was an organized and structured method to reduce overhead.

JIT is standard today in manufacturing, and it has seeped into the way everyone conducts business. However, this method isn't easy, and requires

discipline to systematically identify what to change, then work on a process to get it right. Obviously, I don't want a car with only a "pretty good" set of brakes.

INSTANT GRATIFICATION. Some things—like drycleaning and laundry service—can't be obtained instantly. Many clients have an eight-hour (or less) turnaround. While the customer loves the convenience, her level of satisfaction with stain removal, replacement of buttons, and minor repair work can drop rapidly. Giving the customer what she wants when she wants it is a good idea in theory; however, not every item can be cleaned quickly. (That's not exactly true. Any item can be cleaned quickly, but the results may not be so delightful.)

A lot of drycleaner/customer angst can be eliminated simply by stating the obvious: We need more time. If a customer service representative can't or doesn't explain the reasons that cleaning an item will take longer, you can predict the results.

Here are two additional time-warping benchmarks:

The drastic drop in the number of people participating in bowling leagues over the past decade. A friend of mine has bowled in leagues for years. He told me not too long ago that

his league had disbanded because few people wanted to commit to a 32-week-long season. It now seems that even recreation is a candidate for speediness.

Texting. One of my staff members has a daughter who is attending college in another state. Each morning when she comes to work, she puts her cell phone on her desk. Five to six times a day, she receives text messages from her 20-year-old updating her status during the day. Quick communication about the most minor events is now a way of life. So is her rapid response.

TOO RAPID A RESPONSE? Several clients use texts or e-mail to notify their customers when items are ready. I like the idea of using multiple communication channels (particularly with younger customers). However, in some cases, speedy communication is a hindrance.

Just last month, a mystery shopper thought her clothing was ready to be picked up. Here's what she wrote:

"Originally I was told my order would be ready after 5 p.m. on Friday. But Friday morning I received an e-mail from XX Cleaners. The e-mail read:
Even though the e-mail specified three

pieces were ready, she thought it meant her entire order was ready. She picked up three items just before 2 p.m. and had to return at 5 to pick up the final piece. Without the additional communication, the customer would have arrived at 5 that Friday to find all of her clothing ready.

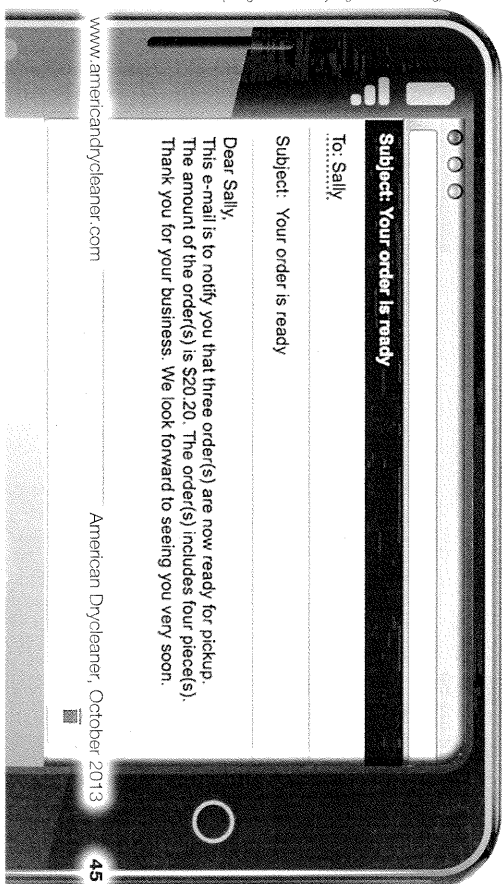
If you use this process, be sure your system is set up to notify the customer only when the entire order is ready.

Gary Maloney from Nil-Yale Glacier Cleaners, Jeffersonville, Ind., e-mailed me: "If your customer is using SPOT POS, there is a setting to keep this from happening. The e-mail will not go out until the entire order (is ready) when there are multiple invoices."

Even the most well-intentioned dry cleaner will need to get items cleaned and ready first. Rapid response just because it's available can be costly to a dry cleaner's reputation. In most cases, drycleaning delivery is not a "hair on fire" moment. ○

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