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BUSINESS BUILDER

A Different Battle

Extra security spending means cleaning cuts. But will that cause more damage?

By John P. Walker

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There's a crisis looming in the cleaning industry. You may not have noticed it yet, but you will. Since before the Great Depression the cleaning industry has been immune to depression, inflation and recession. Bad times never seemed to hit the cleaning industry very hard. Those days may be over.

For the past 18 months my consulting work has been, in large measure, working with companies who are going through recession, even depression economics. Some organizations have been mandated to cut their cleaning budgets by as much as 30 percent. One

company we are working with has cut their cleaning budget by over 50 percent.

These kinds of cuts are coming in all kinds of organizations. We've seen it in schools K-12, colleges, and universities, property management companies and health care organizations. Everyone has always tried to do more with less. Now we're doing more with a lot less.

Sept. 11, 2001 appears to be when this phenomenon started. We saw an immediate and frightening impact on the airline industry. Within 12 months we started seeing a ripple effect in educational cleaning and other areas.

High-level administrators who a couple of years ago may have had a budget surplus are now asking custodial operations to give back large chunks of their budgets. We've been hearing repeatedly that funding organizations, such as states, counties and cities, are bankrupt. One large university we're working with laid off 100 custodians this year, an unprecedented move.

At schools and businesses nationwide, some of the money cleaning budgets lost seemed to be migrating to security improvements as administrators responded to a very real risk of terror at home. Organizations suddenly needed money for metal-detecting wands, concrete perimeter barriers, special people-funneling fences and extra security personnel.

But diverting money from sanitation to security presents its own risk, one that few people take seriously. That is the risk that public health can be adversely

affected when organizations slash cleaning too deeply. This form of budget attack can result in unclean and unsanitary conditions.

Is a cutback on cleaning any kind of threat to be compared with terrorism? It may be more serious than the public suspects. In the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, approximately 3,000 innocent victims were tragically and hideously killed. The image still haunts. The weekend before the attacks I was returning with my wife from a trip to Copenhagen and Stockholm. We had been on a fact-finding tour to learn about microfiber. On Friday night at sunset, we were parked on the tarmac at JFK airport. The Manhattan skyline was silhouetted in a pink sunset. The World Trade Center stood the tallest in the evening sky on the last Friday it would ever stand. It was gone the next week with 3,000 souls.

But, that same year, approximately 100,000 Americans died in a different tragedy. These people, as innocent and deserving to live as those in the World Trade Center and Pentagon, died of nosocomial infections. Do you know what that word means? Everyone in the cleaning industry should know the word nosocomial. It means hospital- acquired. It is a hospital-acquired infection. That means you get the infection from the hospital — not just at the hospital, but from the hospital. The hospital gives it to you. You go in for treatment and you come out in a body bag.

Typically, nosocomial infections are related to poor hand washing and other hygiene among the medical staff. However, they also are linked to poor housekeeping practices.

Housekeeping practices relate to the cleaning and sanitation practices of the hospital. The cross infections and cross contamination in a hospital occur largely on fomites (another word cleaners should know). A fomite is a physical object that transmits disease or any infectious agent from person to person. For example, a doorknob, a telephone, a carpet or a water faucet all can be fomites.

Why are these important words? It is estimated that in 2002 more than 100,000 people died from nosocomial infections. The number of nosocomial deaths has been rising the past several years, just as housekeeping budgets have been declining. Two million additional patients contracted infections but did not die from them. With approximately 36 million hospital visits annually, you stand a six-percent chance of experiencing a nosocomial infection and a one-in- 360 chance of dying.

Nosocomial infections kill more people every year than any other form of accidental death, and that includes car crashes, fires, burns, falls, drowning and poisonings. It also includes terrorist acts.

What's not included in nosocomial-infection-related statistics is information on diseases acquired from workplaces, schools, malls and other areas where humans congregate. There's no word for those infections. They may not be as deadly — but who knows? It isn't talked about with very much alarm.

Traveling on an airplane, sitting in my office or even walking down the street, I stand a very small chance of being killed in a terrorist attack. But I stand a much greater risk of entering the hospital for treatment (or just walking through a supermarket) and not coming out alive. Infections related to cleaning, or the lack of it, are real and they're deadly.

The entire world mourned the 3,000 victims of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. But where is the outcry for the hundreds of thousands of Americans killed by contamination?

The world has changed and everyone understands that terrorism is a new threat that must be addressed. It's time for the cleaning industry to wake up and speak out. It's time to evangelize cleaning. It's time to educate the public and the policy makers on the importance security role that cleaning plays in every building. It's time to reduce the amount of deaths that come from an invisible terrorist, one whose worst enemy is an effective cleaning process and a thorough approach to sanitation.

It's time for you to demonstrate the importance of cleaning.

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