

the ART of FLAWLESS WINDOWS

Christina North, Amber Terry

Commercial window cleaning and maintenance is more important than you may realize

Did you know that a skilled window-cleaning technician can squeegee an entire pane of large commercial glass without ever lifting the squeegee from the window?

Many people are surprised to learn that window washing is a skilled trade. In fact, some say it's an art form. You can teach just about anybody how to do it; however, it takes a long time to truly master the technique and clean with both speed and precision.

Here are a few other window-washing facts that might make you appreciate the trade a bit more:

Windows can be cleaned in below-freezing temperatures. Technicians don protective warm and waterproof clothes and use a special freeze-proof cleaning solution. However, huge snowdrifts can block sidewalks and limit accessibility to the side of the building.

Every year at the International Window Cleaning Association (IWCA) Convention, a speed window-cleaning contest is held. The top contenders can clean and squeegee three windows (including wiping ledges) in under 15 seconds. While most professional window washers do not move as quickly as those contest winners, they definitely operate with a much higher productivity than a person cleaning with paper towels and spray glass cleaner. Most restaurants use their in-house staff for spot cleaning, but hire a window cleaner for a full clean, since it is a labor-intensive task.

The tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, has 160 floors and 24,000 panes of glass. It takes about 60 technicians three months to clean them, and then they start all over again!

Fortunately, not many of today's restaurant facility managers need to deal with challenging situations such as these. However, many facility managers are still responsible for the care and maintenance of thousands of panes of glass across their markets.

Window-Cleaning Basics

Why do windows need cleaning? Outside of the obvious reasons (better visibility, brand image), another important reason is to avoid glass degradation. Glass is a porous surface (a cross section reveals microscopic peaks and valleys) that can be permeated or etched over time with airborne pollutants, runoff from concrete facades and hardwater sources. A lack of routine cleaning can lead to eventual glass cleaning procedures becoming more costly due to additional labor or special chemicals to remove the contaminants.

What about frequency? The actual timeframes for necessary upkeep can vary based on local weather conditions, building runoff and soil load factors, such as nearby construction, urban environment and proximity to loose soil that can be blown on the windows. The Building Owners and Managers Association International (BOMA) recommends exterior window surface cleaning two to four or more times per year, depending on the specific environment.

Restaurants generally maintain a higher standard of appearance than other types of facilities. A common cleaning frequency used by restaurant facilities are interior windows on a monthly basis, with the exterior windows cleaned twice monthly. It is also important to optimize the frequency to the needs of each facility; for example, allocating more frequent service to high-sales volume sites or those in urban locations.

Outsource or In-House?

Facility managers today take a variety of approaches to manage their window-cleaning programs. Some chains task the general managers to handle the cleaning at a site level by hiring local window cleaners. These relatively small-dollar-value transactions are typically paid with a p-card system or from the register. The benefits are that the managers can control the frequency of the cleaning as they see fit for their site, and in some cases, may pay very competitive rates due to the low operating overhead of the local route service. Also, as the payment is handled at the site, there is less administrative burden on the corporate accounting team.

The drawbacks of this system are that the facility manager has little or no visibility into the total cost associated with this trade, and there may be vast inconsistencies in the cleaning frequencies. (One manager may select weekly window cleaning while another in the same city chooses quarterly.) Also, due to the low entry cost for hiring a window-washing company, many local route vendors do not carry the appropriate levels of insurance, or possibly, none at all.

Regional or national facility managers frequently choose to outsource their maintenance programs. In this case, the main benefits are the ability to control and forecast the costs of the program. This includes the ability to optimize the program, selecting and locking in the cleaning frequency that is the best fit for their brands, risk-mitigation through appropriate vendor insurance levels and consolidated invoicing. In some cases, the per-service cost may increase; however, this is typically balanced by the reduction of excessive services and risk. A regional or national vendor may be able to provide service discounts based on volume.

Other Preventive Maintenance and Repairs

Windows should be inspected at least once a year for seals and caulking. When an insulated glass unit has a seal failure, the window begins to capture condensation between the two panes and eventually a milky mildew stain appears. Cold drafts also indicate air leakage, which can affect comfort. This happens as caulk and seals age and are subjected to weather and movement from high winds or building pressurization.

In this case, the unit will need to be replaced, since cleaning and replacing seals is not a viable remedy. Integrity of seals or caulking is critical, as a leaky window can become costly due to floor damage or moisture issues in surrounding walls that result in mildew or mold. Other potential problems to monitor include malfunctioning hardware, corrosion of metal finishes and peeling paint or water damage on wood finishes.

Graffiti, Vandalism and Breakage

In the window repair business, it's not uncommon to encounter damage caused by vandals or thieves throwing bricks or rocks through storefronts, as well as both etching and acid graffiti on glass and existing film. In some cases, vandals may tag framing and doors themselves.

Although polishing and buffing glass is an option that facility managers inquire about when their glass is vandalized with scratches or etching, this service is not something that is generally recommended. It is sometimes unfeasible to polish glass if the material is etched beyond the surface. Also, even when buffing is potentially feasible, it can weaken or break the existing material, may leave impurities and is sometimes too labor intensive to be cost-effective.

Most glass and general maintenance companies offer emergency board-up service, glass and mirror replacement, refinishing of doors and framing, furnishing and installing of security film, and antigraffiti film. Another consideration is to change glass from annealed or tempered to laminated so that the glass stays together if it is hit with a projectile, rather than shattering completely.

Manufacturers have done a great job of improving the service life and performance of windows, and they can easily become an afterthought. However, they are still a major investment, as they are expected to remain in place for 30 years or more. During that time, they are exposed to extreme changes in temperature, wind and other weather conditions that can affect their appearance and performance. Taking a closer look at your windows, the life-cycle cost of this asset can be applied to justify repair and maintenance, just like many other less visible components of restaurant facilities.

Left: Christina North is the President and Founder of ASAP Glass & Door, LLC and has been in the glass and door business, helping national chain customers, since 2000. She and her growing team are based in Denton, Texas, and have been offering 24/7 service throughout the U.S. since 2011. Right: Amber Terry, VP of Sales at Superclean for 12 years, has been a RFMA member since year one. Her education and background in biology, environmental health, and business management make her the best toilet (and window) cleaning specialist, ever.