

# TREAT EM CLEAN, KEEP EM KEEN



Centre cleanliness is expected, and it should never be neglected. Industry experts give their advice on keeping up standards.

The British public love to complain. As soon as they don't like something, someone is going to hear about it, and with social media and review sites like TripAdvisor it is easier to do than ever, and impossible to hide. A negative review can have a hugely detrimental effect on any business, and a reputation is often a difficult thing to rebuild – making a centre's cleanliness vital.

The rise of social media means hygiene complaints can be instantly shared to a wide audience, allowing negative impressions to spread infinitely quicker than word of mouth," says Steve Nurdin, marketing manager at Cannon Hygiene. "But, the size of most shopping centres can make spotting and responding to problems a slow and potentially inefficient way to maintain cleanliness. Instead, having solutions in place that can work in tandem in the background will help prevent minor issues becoming media sandstorms."

As shopping centres, particularly the larger ones, strive for destination status, they are under pressure to maintain a constant high standard of cleanliness, but the large volume of people passing through each day can put a strain on facilities, and if it is not managed properly then the centre is at risk of anything from a damaged

reputation to a lawsuit.

"Washrooms are usually the main target for accusations of poor cleanliness," continues Nurdin. "Facilities managers should harness new hygiene technologies to support their cleaning regimes. For example, automated fragrance diffusers can help keep washrooms (and other areas where odour might be a problem) smelling fresh throughout the day – there is nothing much more off-putting than a bad smell.

"Investing in high quality, automatic hand driers and soap dispensers also promotes an impression of cleanliness and wellbeing. In general, care should be taken to make sure facilities are attractive and fit-for-purpose, reassuring customers that the centre operates a genuine commitment to hygiene and reducing the opportunity for unwanted complaints."

The washroom is important in setting the cleanliness standard, but it's just one area that needs monitored. Axis Group, a security, cleaning, front-of-house and support services organisation, was recently awarded a three-year contract to deliver cleaning and security services to Houndshell shopping centre in Blackpool. Simon Giles, group finance director and COO at Axis Cleaning & Support Services, explains the challenges that operators face



in implementing a cleaning strategy.

"The best cleaning companies treat every client as unique," says Giles. "Obviously they are going to cover the fundamentals, but every centre comes with its own challenges, from layout to location to the building materials. They're all going to have different specifications that need to be tended to."

He uses Houndshell as an example, explaining how its being exposed to the elements adds a different dimension to consider in the cleaning process. The Blackpool centre is located by the sea making it susceptible to the wind, and its outside canopy is constantly under pressure from the salt water, which he says

says, including significant increases in the summer holiday and Christmas periods. The dramatic influx of people to take into account, can ramp up cleaning issues really quickly, and so teams need to have a strategy.

"Technology is one of the best tools we have at our disposal for this," says Giles. "An example of this is the Overtech system. It uses heat mapping technology to track where people are moving and shows us the areas that have the most people, which usually means we need to pay them extra attention in terms of cleaning, so if the system shows that there is an increase in footfall in a certain location we can deploy our cleaning teams to focus on those areas."

The technology allows centre teams to observe and tackle things like spillages and slippages straight away, so as soon as something happens it can be addressed before it becomes a bigger problem. "We aim for a quick turnaround," Giles says, "and when the footfall goes up, so do the spillages, so do the risks and so we need to be able to stop potential problems faster than ever and reduce downtime to an absolute minimum."

One of the mantras of the Axis Group is the importance of communication among teams. The group provides a wide service that covers more than just cleaning, with the option of employing teams of cleaning and security staff and make sure the operations are linked rather than separate due to the significant crossover between the two.

"We offer a cleaning service, a security service, or both," Giles tells. "The combined service is preferable because it creates a more straightforward dialogue. Everyone is part of the same team and when there's more communication it's much easier to get things done quickly and efficiently when everyone shares the same ethos, even down to things like uniform. It's about being consistent and that really makes a

difference."

The staff Axis employs are more than just cleaners and security guards. They receive training to make them centre ambassadors who can help with things around the centre as a whole rather than just their specialist area. "If someone needs directions or help in any kind of way then it can only take thirty seconds to help someone out," he says. "Again, we strive to give customers the best experience and cleanliness and security are one part of that."

The important thing when it comes to cleaning, according to Giles, is communication. A shopping centre is a mammoth operation to manage and a lack of communication among staff is likely to increase the risk of problems arising. The likes of cleaning and security are background noise to consumers, their presence rarely observed, but their absence at the most crucial time can have a significant, negative impact. It is important, therefore, to make the processes such as cleaning as smooth and unobtrusive as possible to minimise disruption. The old adage that "the customer is always right" is perhaps most relevant to the likes of cleanliness as at the end of the day maintaining a clean centre is one of the fundamental footfall drivers.

"From our perspective, it's the customer-client relationship that is important," Giles says. "We want to help ensure that when a person visits a shopping centre they have the best possible experience, and a clean centre should be a fundamental part of that. That is our key pitch when it comes to any retail environment."

"I actually come from a retail background, and it's going to sound a bit cheesy but I'm going to use the term 'retail is detail'. It might sound a bit daft but it's true. It applies to shops, to food courts, to bathrooms to windows; in other words the centre as a whole. Everything has to be clean. Floor to ceiling without exception."