



SERVICE

# Today's Service Department, Part One

## Challenges Faced by Distributors

by John Purswell

**M**any readers will be surprised or even shocked by what I have to say about industrial cleaning systems distributor service departments. If I had been asked to write this article two years ago, I would have had different things to say. The business landscape has changed so dramatically in the last 24 months that the issues are different now than they were even a few months ago. The changes may not have extended to all parts of the country yet and probably have not spread uniformly.

### **Widespread Cost-Cutting**

Before addressing the nuts and bolts of running a service department, I want to cover some things that are not so obvious. Here is one example, a conversation with an employee of a multibillion dollar company. The firm is a multinational company that virtually every reader would recognize if named. A shop supervisor called and began asking me questions about repairing their pressure washer. I answered the questions until I felt the man was asking for information that he was not qualified to use.

In other words, he was trying to make evaluations, repairs, and adjustments without

the proper training and test equipment, and that posed a danger to him and the employees around him. I told him that due to the dangers and liabilities involved, I could not go any further with troubleshooting and repairs over the telephone. I urged him to let me send a technician with the proper training and test equipment to repair their equipment and return it to current safety standards. His response was that if I would not help him, they would just have to take their oil tools to a car wash because the company was not letting them spend any money with contractors until further notice. That has been at least a year and they still have not allowed us to repair their machine!

#### DIY Repairs

Our distributorship is seeing cost-cutting such as just described in varying degrees across our customer base. What is the big deal of repairing a pressure washer? It is just a pump and motor—right? Yes, those are a couple of the components. However, the ways they are assembled with the safety devices are critical. There is a downside to untrained personnel repairing pressure washers. If done improperly, the results can damage the equipment beyond repair, or in the worst case be fatal. Yet we regularly see people

rolling the dice with their safety as well as that of their employees.

The term positive displacement pump means the water must go somewhere if the pump operates. That is an oversimplification but it is correct. If the unloader is incorrectly placed or assembled, something is going to break. Sometimes when that something breaks, it can be violent! The larger and more powerful the machine, the greater the danger. The terminology is confusing enough for a novice: The outlet of the pump must be piped to the inlet of the unloader and the outlet of the unloader must be plumbed to the inlet of the coil, then the bypass of the unloader is piped back to the inlet of the pump. If you get confused, you can destroy the equipment or get hurt or killed.

Hot water equipment typically has a burner that may generate 10 or more times the heat produced in an average home water heater. Thermal expansion can raise coil pressures at roughly 100 psi per second if the burner does not cut off when the trigger gun is released. Distributors and manufacturers go to great lengths to assure that the burner will cut off. However, most novices do not even know the burner is supposed to cut off! Yet,

we regularly see untrained and unskilled personnel attempting repairs. Manufacturers try to consistently engineer redundant safeties onto equipment to prevent catastrophic failures, but we see untrained repair personnel bypass, plug, remove, and wire around them.

Safety is the best and most important case I can make to use professionally trained technicians. It is my understanding that other countries require yearly inspections by certified technicians for each pressure washer. In that regard, they are a few years ahead of the USA. I predict that the same forces that drove their regulation will catch up with our market. (*Ed. note: Germany requires annual inspection of hot water washers by qualified technicians and has a standard for repairs and modifications, DIN/VDE 0701-1.*)

When the channels of distribution broadened and parts became available from many big box stores, distributors lost the ability to stay in the picture for repairs and operator safety training. The big box stores do not have those skills and are not likely to acquire them because of the margins they operate on.

#### DIY Installations

Since I have this soap box, I want to address natural and LP gas equipment sold direct to end users. To this



date, I have never seen a properly installed gas-fired machine purchased direct from the manufacturer and installed by the customer without distributor input. I have never talked to a plumber, that I can recall, who had a grasp of how much gas a pressure washer requires to heat 240 to 600 gallons of water per hour and give it a 140F rise. It is simply beyond their scope of normal work. You do not see boilers or heating and cooling equipment for an entire building sold and shipped direct. It is sold

through distribution for a reason. The distributor can guide the sizing, selection, and installation, even though plumbers do the actual piping as required by local codes.

Venting is another whole safety issue which most customers do not grasp. Tell the average plumbing supply house you need a 12 in. draft diverter and they will say, "You want what?" You can purchase stack but not always draft diverters. That would lead me to believe there is not a lot of our type equipment being

installed by local plumbers. I have been required to tell numerous customers, "I can't touch this thing because the first cold day you pull all the overhead doors down, you are going to wipe out your entire staff."

I will close this subject by commenting that numerous times I have been called by my service people and asked, "What should I do? The machine is hard plumbed, both gas and water, hard wired, and vented with the walls practically touching the equipment on three sides. To top that off, it cannot be removed from the building because the building was built around it, and the door is half the size required to remove the machine!" In this kind of situation, I may have to get on the phone with a potential new customer and decline the opportunity to serve them. When asked why, I tell them that my service people must actually be able to get to the components to test and repair their machine. Just looking at it like a cow looks at the moon normally does not yield the desired results. All these installation and service disasters could have been avoided with the input from the service department of a competent distributor at the installation stage.

A well-trained service and installation department can yield great rewards for the customer by keeping personnel safe from improperly installed and incorrectly repaired equipment. There is no amount of cost-cutting that can justify facing a widow from the witness stand. Train your staff to sell your service department as a great investment in keeping your customers' cleaning systems operating safely and at optimum performance. Keep the customers' personnel at work doing what they were hired to do, making money for their company.

*John Purswell is CEO of Alklean Industries, Inc., a Pasadena, TX distributor. Part 2 of this article will discuss functions and requirements of the service department. cr*



**Here's What YOU  
Could Find in  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
October 31, November 1-2, 2004**

- The Best Pressure Washers and Accessories in the Industry
- The Latest Trends
- Environmentally Safe Chemicals
- Hiring and Retaining Employees
- Understanding Biotechnology
- Waste Water Recycling
- Sales Training
- Inventory Management
- Marketing Your Business

and Back by Popular Demand... *David Goldsmith!*

**Can You Really AFFORD  
to Miss This Show?**

PowerClean 2004 Is Proud to Welcome Exhibitors, Distributors, Suppliers, and Commercial & Industrial Users to Our Industry's Event of the Year.

**Contact the CETA Office for Your Exhibitor  
Prospectus Kit or Attendee Kit...  
Don't Miss This Once-a-Year Opportunity!**



Cleaning Equipment Trade Association  
7691 Central Ave. NE, Suite 201 • Fridley, MN 55432  
[www.ceta.org](http://www.ceta.org) • Toll Free: 800-441-0111 • Fax: 763-786-7775  
Email: [jenny@ceta.org](mailto:jenny@ceta.org) or [carol@ceta.org](mailto:carol@ceta.org)

For information circle 117