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GUILD OF CLEANERS AND LAUNDERERS

Technical Bulletin January 2019 Issue TB 65

Quality Garment Finishing Is A Competitive Advantage

In some regions competition in retail textile cleaning is now more intense than it has been since the ban on smoking was adopted in the UK in July 2007. Following this other high street businesses began to suffer from a growing trend for “On Line” shopping which inevitably means fewer customers in town and city centres making a trip to the cleaners a choice that may not be coupled with another reason to visit the High Street. Together with this, supermarkets, with their advantage of onsite free parking, still continue to extend their product ranges into retail drycleaning.

Many retail cleaners are fighting back by adding new services, providing a laundry service plus some are moving out of town to provide a central processing facility feeding shops and agents plus adding a collection and delivery service many coupled to an online app. It is common to hear of a cleaner seeing drycleaning as very price sensitive and attempt to compete and retain their market share solely on the basis of price rather than on the quality and presentation of their product. This marketing strategy can be a mistake, particularly in areas where high value/designer label items form a not insignificant part of the workload. In fact a growing number of cleaners have now started to introduce, or are considering introducing, higher charges for expensive garments and designer label items.

This move is, perhaps, long overdue. Many cleaners have long held the view that the cleaning charge for high value garments should reflect the value of the item and the increased exposure of the cleaner in the unfortunate event of a claim. Furthermore, Designer and High value items often require much more care and skill in stain removal and usually take much longer to finish to the high standards that the customer expects. There are of course many pitfalls for the unwary. The response of some high value items to the cleaning process can be difficult to predict and aftercare instructions such as ‘Dryclean Only’ exclusive of trimmings, (when the trimming forms an integral part of the garment and removal is not an option), do not inspire confidence with some cleaners. However, not all Designer wear presents a problem and there can be plenty of opportunity here to increase your turnover if you have, or can develop, the skills and expertise to safely handle this kind of work.

CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

In general most customers expect their cleaner to deliver to them a clean, stain free well finished garment and if asked would like their garment to look ‘like new.’ In most cases this is realistic and quite achievable, but how often are these expectations realised?

As professional textile cleaners, we believe that the quality of our cleaning is at least as good if not significantly better than our competitors. In terms of cleanliness and stain removal a good inspection of the garment will reveal if it is clean and stain free. The standard of finish is however much more difficult to determine as it is not a black and white situation as is the case with cleanliness and stains. This is because after finishing all garments (including new) will still exhibit finishing faults varying from the insignificant and difficult to detect to occasionally, the very obvious. The final inspector therefore has



DRY CLEAN ONLY
DELICATE 
LOW TEMPERATURE
LOW MOISTURE
LOW MECHANICAL ACTION
LOW DRYING TEMPERATURE,
THE CARE INSTRUCTIONS
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DURING CLEANING AND WILL
ONLY BE ACCEPTED BY A
QUALITY DRY CLEANER
MADE IN ENGLAND

to constantly make valued judgements in relation to whether finishing faults are irrelevant and can be ignored or need correction.

Final inspection is not an easy task, as it requires a very high level of concentration while at the same time being repetitive. Do not assume that any member of staff can inspect work. Inspectors need to be taught what well finished garments look like and trained to inspect in a systematic way.

AIM FOR THE BEST

There are three main factors that influence the finishing of textiles these are: -

- Temperature
- Pressure
- Cooling

Temperature and pressure do of course need to be related to the textile and pressure is not always required as in the case of pile fabrics. Heat and particularly steam, relaxes textiles and allows them to be reconfigured in their finished form. Cooling is a critical part of this process and sets the finish. The importance of fully cooling to set the finish cannot be over emphasised. What is not always understood is that with the exception of electric steam irons, and assuming a steam pressure of around 65psi, the temperatures achieved with steam heated irons and during forming and pressing are unlikely to exceed 120°C or in other words a little above a cool iron setting. In many cases fabric temperatures are unlikely to reach 100°C. for example when forming in a rotor cabinet or when using a steam heated iron in conjunction with vacuum.

It is not surprising therefore, that cleaners are often unable to achieve good standards of finish on cotton and linen in particular and can occasionally struggle with problems such as retained wear creases on wool/polyester combinations.

It will be clear from the above that if the best standards of finish are to be achieved the question of temperature and finishing methodology needs to be considered. It will be obvious that high production rates (such as boasted 60 pairs of trousers an hour on ironing tables) are not consistent with producing a quality product. For pressing, the recommended steam time on robust fabrics is around 2½ seconds. Assuming a good vacuum, the cooling time may need to be up to 5 seconds. Bearing this in mind a press production rate of around 16 -18 pairs of trousers an hour is realistic for a good quality finish on garments that have been 'topped'. A similar production rate is applicable to ironing systems. In factory, or central processing situations, specialist trouser pressers finishing to a good standard around 24 pairs an hour on well maintained equipment.

In order to produce the best standards of finish, precise control over **Steam time, Pressure and Cooling** must be exercised. The following key points are critical :-

- Check the press locking pressure at the start of each working day
- Maintain press and ironing table clothing in good condition
- Good vacuum is essential. A good vacuum should fully cool the bottom buck/ironing surface within 5 seconds after heating with steam.
- Steam response (the time taken for steam to fully penetrate through the clothing when the steam valve is opened) should be no more than 2½ seconds.
- Finishing equipment must be maintained in good mechanical condition

It should be born in mind that steam response times must be added to the steam time, so with a response time of 1½ seconds the total time for pressing each lay would be 4 seconds followed by vacuum. Check your equipment against these criteria - you may get a surprise. It may surprise you to come across a press with a response time of 11 seconds, and response times of around 5 seconds are not uncommon. Hard consolidated clothing is often responsible as steam does not flow through it easily and is often



blown out around the edges.

HANDLING AND FINISHING HIGH VALUE GARMENTS

Designer Label and high value garments can be particularly difficult and time consuming to finish, which is of course, one of the reasons we should be charging more for them. It is also recommended that you **extend the service time** on these items so that you establish a clear relationship between the cleaning charge and how long it takes to do the job. Customers are more likely to accept a higher charge if they believe that their garment requires very special care over and above that required for less expensive items. They are not likely to be convinced of this if you offer a short service time.



Problems very often arise with high value garments due to :-

- Failure at the counter to inspect the garment properly and establish its value.
- Failure to inspect and assess the garment properly before it is cleaned.

When accepting high value items for cleaning particular attention should be paid to the care label, staining and any signs of fabric damage including colour loss. In the case of complex garments such as wedding dresses and ball gowns an assessment may need to be made with regard to finishing. It is easy to overlook finishing when accepting items but if there are potential problems it is too late to start thinking about them once the garment has been cleaned. If counter staff are in any doubt it is usually possible to ask for advice from an expert in production. Alternatively the decision can be delayed and the customer contacted when any problems have been investigated.

It is appreciated that proper inspection at the counter is not always possible or appropriate. This is particularly the case when a number of customers are waiting to be served or when the customer is in a hurry. Under these circumstances the garment can be put to one side and assessed later. If necessary, the customer can then be contacted prior to cleaning. Always be sure that any potential problems are brought to the attention of the customer before you go ahead. Many cleaners work on the basis that the more expensive and exclusive the garment, the less likely it is that it will have been properly tested for its response to any aftercare process advocated by the care label. This is even relevant today as many of these garments are being produced in the far east. The best advice is if in doubt do not accept the item or ask for 'owners risk' making sure to explain in detail to the customer the nature of the problem and confirm in writing. **Always confirm that the customer is the owner of the garment and ask them to sign the risk form before going ahead.** In the case of high value items, it is most unwise to discuss owners risk or accept a signature from anyone but the owner of the garment.

Very often the cleaner has only them self to blame when things go pear shaped, often realising when it too late, that the item cost many hundreds of pounds.

FINISHING TECHNIQUES

There is no doubt that it is a distinct advantage if the cleaner has both ironing and pressing equipment as some items such as heavy weight coats may be easier to finish on say a manual press, whereas silks are often more easily finished on ironing equipment. However, it is appreciated that today the majority of cleaners do not use presses. For those handling a large volume of complex items it is an advantage if the cleaner has a set of puff irons. In addition, **modern forming equipment with additional steam heating** can produce very high standards of finish and reduce very considerably the need for skilled comprehensive finishing methods. Much time and effort on the part of skilled staff can be saved by the use of the latest type of equipment.



As trousers and jackets together make up around 70% of the typical drycleaners workload, it is very important that a high level of competence is developed with regarding the finishing of these items.

Ironing

Ironing systems started to replace presses in the drycleaning industry in the mid 1980's, their use soon became widespread because it is much easier to train staff on ironing equipment. However, ironing techniques are often limited to ironing with the vacuum applied and finishing staff rarely receive any formal training. This is probably due to the fact that ironing is often seen as merely an extension of domestic ironing. A modern top of the range professional ironing table will normally be equipped with :-

- A steam heated or an electric steam iron (usually optional)
- Ironing surface steam
- Vacuum and air blowing coupled with air volume control
- Foot controls on either side of the table

It will of course, be appreciated that basic finishing skills need to be taught 'hands on' by a trainer. However, I have occasionally found that some trainers are not aware of the contribution to standards of finish the following ironing techniques can make.

- Ironing with steam but without vacuum – will often remove set in creases.
- Ironing without steam and with or without vacuum – try these variations if you have problems finishing difficult lightweight wool fabrics
 - Smoothing with a mock iron (paddle) while using ironing surface steam. This technique is useful for finishing satin fabrics, silks and some linings.
 - Ironing with steam while using the blower – also used for finishing silks and linings

Note

Some satin fabrics may be de-lustred if condensate is ejected from formers or irons during finishing. If using an electric steam iron always check the temperature setting is appropriate for the fabric you are finishing.

When ironing with steam and vacuum, remember that you are heating and cooling simultaneously and therefore fabric temperatures will be lower and set in creases in particular may not respond. Soft creases are a very common fault on trousers.

When ironing trouser creases **make sure the point of the iron precisely follows the crease**. The steam is only ejected through a small area near the point of the iron. If this does not pass directly over the crease the result will be a poor crease. **Iron slowly to ensure a sharp crease**. Allowing the iron to 'wander' (zig zag) is responsible for many finishing faults on creases.

Pressing

Pressing is of course the traditional method of finishing in the industry and while it has fallen into decline, there is still a good range of equipment available from old refurbished Hoffmans to sophisticated scissor presses equipped with a sleeve arm and air blowing. Common pressing faults are often due to :-

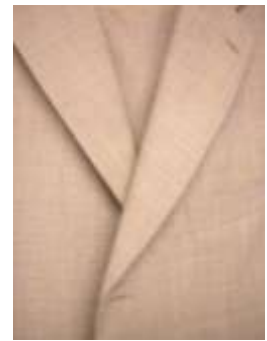
- Allowing the press clothing to become hard and consolidated
- Poor vacuum
- Failure to adjust the locking pressure correctly
- Releasing the head with the vacuum on (a frequent cause of vacuum marks on trouser legs)
- Vacuuming with the head locked on pressure sensitive



fabrics

- Failure to correctly finish and set lapels - one of the most common finishing faults (pressing & ironing)

Pressers should note that when the head of the press is closed and locked only **top steam should be used** not top and bottom or just bottom steam. Also, vacuum should never be applied while top steaming, this can cause symmetrical steam patterns on some fabrics.



Although pressers usually believe that garments can be finished to a better standard on a press and many are reluctant to finish on ironing equipment, the fact is that either type of equipment can produce equally high standards of finish. It all comes down to skill and expertise of the individual.

Finally, customers with expensive clothing usually find it difficult to accept that for one reason or another their garment may not respond satisfactorily to drycleaning, stain removal or finishing. It is a good idea therefore to have on hand articles that are published in the trade press, or Guild's Amber Alerts which identify the various problem areas. In the case of high value and Designer items customers naturally expect them to perform at least as well if not better than mass produced garments. As we all know this is not usually the case, the vast majority of mass produced garments are likely to respond much more reliably to the aftercare processes recommended on care labels.

<p>Final inspection Look out for these points</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> All pockets pressed flat with no impressions showing through No zip impressions No seam impressions No double creases No wrinkles around crotch area Waistband wrinkle free 	
<p>Stage 13 Final Presentation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A well rolled collar Sleeve seam pressed without crow's feet puckering Flaps and pockets flat and wrinkle free without seam impressions Back pleat flat and not gaping Lay of collar correct Soft rolled sleeves with creases No pressed in creases No button impressions Cuff edges flat and smooth 	
<p>Stage 7 Final presentation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> No wrinkles over shoulder Sleeve/shoulder seam carefully pressed No wrinkles under arms Bodice shaped to figure, no puckering at bust darts Rollled sleeves and cuff. Cuffs level all round, equal depth Un-pressed pleats left unpressed Pleats straight, correctly aligned Neck facing smooth Collar softly rolled and wrinkle free Bodice facings smooth Placket or zip opening straight, closed, no puckering Skirt seams straight and smooth Even and straight hemline 	
<p>Step 6 Final presentation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Waistband flat and wrinkle free Hips shaped correctly Seams straight Pleats correctly aligned, not gaping Hem even and straight No seam impressions Zip closed and wrinkle free 	

Final Presentation Inspection Points to the left have been copied from the Guild Manual on Garment Finishing which covers both Hand Ironing and Pressing using a scissor type (Hoffman) press. These manuals and others in the series can be obtained from the Guild Secretariat

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