

Choosing a Cleaning Service – Eight Pitfalls to Avoid ©

Avoiding the pitfalls of hiring the wrong provider can be trying because you don't always know what questions to ask. Understanding the pitfalls and the questions you should ask will help steer you into a happy long-term relationship.

By Ines A. Cohron

Pitfall #1: Relying solely on references

While getting references is a reasonable request, the company is likely to give you the referral they always give out and every company is bound to have at least one or two satisfied clients. This is not necessarily because the company wants to mislead you. They may not want to take up their clients' time which is ultimately what they are trying to save as a cleaning company. Additionally, the clients that serve as references may not have the same needs or expectations you have, and it is difficult to gauge that in a phone call. You are well served asking other questions. In today's digital age online reviews are a good source of information. Is there consistency in the negative comments? When there was a problem, how did the company respond? Look across different review sites like Google, Yelp, Facebook, Angie's List, to name a few.

Pitfall #2: Thinking cleaning products are all the same

Whenever you hear "Don't worry, we've been doing this for years" in response to your product question, you should worry. The company should be able to explain to you not only what products they use, but also why. This is your home and your investment, you should feel comfortable asking. This is an area where most consumers lack the knowledge, so without getting too technical, here are some of the things you should look for in the products to be used in your home...

- Floors. The number one question we get is related to the treatment of wood floors. When we started we used vinegar and water a traditional solution that we also liked because it was green. Months into the business, we consulted with an

industry chemist to make sure we were doing the right thing. He recommended we give up vinegar and water and go with a pH neutral product and told us to stay away from one particular product on the market, the one with the “Oil Soap.” In the name. And remember, when it comes to floors “less is more”, as it relates to moisture.

- Furniture polish. You should avoid products that contain silicones. Silicones are typically found in products that create a lot of shine like the old-time aerosols that many of us grew up with. Even some newer “green” products like will contain silicones. So it is best to call the manufacturer and ask. While silicones are attractive to people because they add more shine, they are difficult sometimes impossible to remove. If you have any doubts, just ask a furniture refinisher. Next in line, are waxes which can accumulate over time and also be difficult to remove. Their accumulation can create a cloudy finish. In conclusion, you use a product without waxes and without silicones.
- Stone surfaces. Granite does not like bases and marble does not like acids and the general rule for your stone surfaces is to stay neutral, pH neutral that is. That is why if someone walks in with Windex you should be wary if that Windex contains ammonia which is a base. Spraying the window above the sink may create a problem with your granite counter which gets residual spray. Likewise, some cleaners may use their all-purpose spray that contains ammonia right on the stone surface.

The goals in product selection are to choose the most environmentally-friendly, healthy products, ensure that the chemistry of the product makes sense for each of the surfaces and select products that do sanitize for germ-ridden areas like the commode.

Pitfall #3: No professional affiliations

You would never choose a doctor who did not maintain his credentials. Part of the credibility of a professional service organization lies in the investment it makes in keeping up with industry best practices and in the ethical standards it follows.

The Association of Residential Cleaning Services International. ([ARCSI](#)) is the only national professional association for residential cleaning companies. Participation in this organization demonstrates a commitment to the ethical standards of ARCSI and the most professional services possible. ARCSI members are dedicated to improving the standards of work and services in the home cleaning industry. By choosing an ARCSI member you are selecting a company that is dedicated to being the best in the nation. Ask the management of the company what their level of participation is in their industry.

Pitfall #4: Choosing on price

Often a consumer will assume that hiring a professional cleaning company will cost significantly more than hiring an individual who works "out of her trunk." While it is true that a fully insured, above-board company will charge more, it is not always much higher. The consumer should be aware of the risks when buying on low price. These include:

- The person has not been screened and you are generally taking them on their word or the word of someone you don't know. Typically, there is no criminal background check.
- They do not have the funds to replace what they damage in your home.
- If they slip and fall on your property they can hold you liable.
- Even if you pay them cash, they can still file for unemployment when they are no longer working for you, creating a major legal and financial liability for you since not paying employment taxes is against the law.
- They will clean and use the products they think are best, often unaware of the science behind the treatment of surfaces like granite, marble slate or even wood.
- There is typically no system or agreement as to what will be completed when your home is cleaned.

As Benjamin Franklin once said..."The bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten." This does not mean that you cannot hire a great individual cleaner, but it is important that you do your own background check, follow legal guidelines with regard taxes to protect yourself.

Pitfall #5: Thinking all insurance is created equal

If you are hiring any service company, you can ask for a Certificate of Insurance to make sure the insurance is up-to-date. One of the reasons you hire a company is to protect yourself and your property from liability. Quite often clients know to ask about insurance, but they don't follow-up to make sure that the company actually has the insurance they say they have. That is where a Certificate of Insurance comes in.

Here is a list of the insurance coverage a cleaning company should have:

- ✓ Worker's Comp coverage \$1,000,000
- ✓ General Liability
 - each occurrence \$1,000,000
 - general aggregate \$2,000,000

What about bonding or employee dishonesty insurance? Most companies will carry bonding and/or employees dishonesty insurance. There are a couple of key questions you want answered, and they are:

- Is there third party coverage? Third party coverage is what covers you, the client. An uninformed business owner will buy “bonding” insurance and not realize that only she is protected and not her clients.
- What is required for a payout? It is difficult to prove that someone actually stole something from your home. It is your word against that of the individual(s) that were in your home. You should ask what is required for a payout – conviction? Termination of an employee? What is the company's procedure in the case where an item goes missing? Finally, what is the dollar amount of the coverage?

Pitfall #6: Absentee ownership

Choosing a service where the owner is not involved in the day-to-day operations can make it difficult to get good service from the office and/or cleaning staff. Having the owner of the company involved increases the level of attention everyone in the business exerts. An involved owner will drive the vision and standards of the business through their leadership. If something goes wrong with your service and the office personnel cannot address it, will the owner be available?

Pitfall #7: A weak hiring process

Aside from a well-designed interview process, the company should employ other tools to select the individuals that will come to work in your home. Find out what tools the company uses. These tools should include the following:

- They should use nationwide criminal background checks not just the less expensive local or state-wide checks. Someone with a criminal record in Pennsylvania or NY state could move to NJ and have a clean slate in NJ.
- Personality testing can provide the company with insight into the individual's attitudes toward service, supervision and even theft.

- A driving record check. After all if this person is going to drive in your neighborhood, you want to be assured that they are safe drivers.

The costly investment in these screening tools will indicate a high level of commitment to your security and the protection of your home.

Pitfall #8: You don't know exactly what is going to be done when the cleaner(s) come to your home

If the company you choose cannot tell you what they will do for you in detail, how will you know whether they did a good job? Choosing a cleaning service without being clear about your expectations and knowing whether the service is comprehensive enough to meet all your needs can lead to major disappointment. For example, ask these questions:

- Does the company offer the frequency or flexibility you desire? Weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or the option to just call in for an appointment?
- What equipment, supplies and cleaning solutions does the company provide? Refer to product pitfall questions.
- If you are allergic to certain chemicals or if you have medical/health issues, does the company offer green cleaning?
- If you are not happy, what will they do?
- How consistent will the team coming to the house be?
- Does the company offer other services, such as organizing, window washing, laundry help, etc.?

Congratulations on becoming an informed consumer. We hope you are on your way to a long-term relationship with a cleaning service that meets *your* needs!

About the Author

Ines Cohron is owner of Total Home Cleaning in NJ, established in 2004. Prior to Total Home she worked for companies including American Express, Dunn and Bradstreet and Staples. She is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and holds a MBA from the Darden School at the University of Virginia.