

June 18, 2007 article by Senior Editor Mark Skaer in AIR CONDITIONING, HEATING & REFRIGERATION NEWS, adapting an original article by our Operations Manager, MJ Palazzolo

Yeah, Somebody Should Do Something About That

“How can they get away with that?” “I can’t believe they are allowed to do that!” These are familiar phrases we’ve all used at one time or another after hearing about some newly reported problem that shocks and boggles our minds and sensibilities when it comes to fairness, ethics, and morals.

Local news broadcasts seem to leave us with these reactions on a nightly basis. We continue to hear stories about things that are blatantly stupid, illegal, or just mean spirited. We see them in our daily lives. All too often our responses are just these passive and mundane utterances, with no real intended action behind them. You have probably said something like this in the last week or so.

Mike Palazzolo, operations manager for Safety King Inc., thought about this at the 2007 National Air Duct Cleaners Association (NADCA) convention, held earlier this year in Nashville, Tenn. One familiar topic surfaced at the annual meeting. It seems to pop up year after year: How do we deal with the “blow-and-go” contractors in the duct cleaning industry?

BAD GUYS OUT THERE

In virtually every market, it’s the same story. These companies take out huge full-page ads with published rates like \$99 or less for a complete home system cleaning. Most are unlicensed, uncertified, and poorly equipped. The coupon mailers are full of these ads. Some have as many as eight or nine in a single publication.

These ads and the unscrupulous companies behind them continue to confuse and mislead. What’s worse is that many of the ads are just bait-and-switch scams that wind up with real prices of \$1,200 or more for a typical, but small, 1,100-square-foot home. Betting on the ignorance of a certain segment of the public, these “cleaning services” are many times not only inferior but really nonexistent (as in the cleaning never actually happens). They are works of fiction and/or illusions.

“Even though these scams represent the worst of the worst, the public may automatically associate ‘us’ with ‘them,’ because the public lacks the information they would need to differentiate the good from the bad,” said Palazzolo. “In this way, these scams are doing damage daily not only to the public, but also to the improving reputation of the duct cleaning industry.

“Yes, a consumer could be labeled an idiot if he falls for this, but many people just assume there are laws that would protect them from this kind of activity. There are, but enforcement is another issue entirely.”

PUSH FOR ENFORCEMENT

NADCA has made attempts in the past to enlist the attorneys general of various states to make contact with and prosecute these scammers. After all, consumer protection is one of the duties they are charged with in their respective states. Why is it that the requests seem to have fallen on deaf ears? In the eyes of Palazzolo, it's possibly because they haven't received the complaints directly from their constituents.

“Maybe they get the impression that it's not that big of a problem, or that it's really about competition and choices in the marketplace,” he said.” But this is a lazy response, and it overlooks the fraud that is openly taking place.”

I agree with Palazzolo. As professionals and advocates for the duct cleaning industry, NADCA members must now begin to push enforcement bodies to actually do the work they have been expecting them to do. As Palazzolo put it, “It's time to remove the bottom feeders from our industry, or at least take an active role in exposing them and making their existence more difficult.”

There is hope. So far only the most extreme and outrageous cases have been pursued, but the results are inspiring. Last year, NADCA member Bill Benito of Connecticut Steam Cleaning was called in by a local TV news station for his expertise in a report that exposed a “blow-and-go” company that was committing fraud. With the complaint and the publicity generated, the state's attorney general pursued a case against that company. The owner was eventually arrested and prosecuted.

This is proof that with some effort, favorable results can and do happen. If you wish to join Palazzolo's fight, e-mail him at mj@ductpro.com.

Mark Skaer

Senior Editor. E-mail him at markskaer@achrnews.com