

Clean Like an Expert

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To become the highly paid domestic engineer you know you can be, you must develop special cleaning techniques that will give you an edge on the competition. Remember, you'll get the best advantage by being professional: Show up on time, be prepared, and work efficiently. I know from personal experience that having a good attitude is a benefit too.

Unless your client has specifically requested that something be done each time, you'll find that lots of tasks can be alternated.

If you're working with a partner, figure out who the detail person is and who the big picture person is and divide the work accordingly. I used to take on the kitchens and bathrooms and Evan did the dusting and vacuuming and everything else. Now we switch roles after two or three months. It keeps the jobs interesting and also encourages us to do better. I'm the tortoise and he's the hare, so we had some adjusting to do. And, of course, this has NEVER happened to us (hah!) but I've heard of partners who occasionally get on each other's nerves, especially if one of them perceives that s/he is doing more than their share. Our advice, after all these years of working together is: Get over it. Adjust your speeds and work it out or split up.

Things to do each time you clean:

At the beginning of each job you may want to remove your shoes -- this is of course optional. Do as you like with your shoes, just be aware of their effect on the floors where you work. Also beware of broken glass in places like the kitchen floor. Locate the check that's been written out to you, and put it directly into your wallet to minimize the chance of misplacing it.

At the conclusion of each job, turn off any lights you've used, put your shoes back on if necessary and do a last minute sweep of the foyer.

Kitchen:

Use a long handled duster and carefully shake it at items up high on the walls or on top of the cupboards. Do as little of this as needed to remove cobwebs. Keep a close eye on your duster to ensure that no harm comes to items attached to the walls. You can never tell by looking how sturdily those items are fixed and you don't want to risk knocking anybody's handcarved Morrocan ceremonial mask off the wall.

Wash down the cupboards, clean the sinks, clean the countertops, stovetop, burners, hood, and wipe down exteriors of all major appliances. Clean the microwave oven inside and out. Clean the floor, wipe the floorboards. Empty the trash and recycling bins.

To clean the cupboards, wipe them down with a clean damp rag of your choice. We use microfiber cleaning cloths, as mentioned in the chapter on the Basic Cleaning Kit. As we mentioned, microfiber cloths don't leave lint, which is a great time saver and paper towel saver too. They're great for jobs requiring a damp wipe. They rinse out fast and with one twisting squeeze you can remove most of the water.

I used to use a little Murphy's Oil Soap on wooden cupboards, diluted with a lot with water in a spray bottle. Now I hardly ever use Murphy's. I rely on a sparse amount of vinegar and a few drops of lemon essential oil, rinsed into a cloth with clean water, then squeezed practically dry. Murphy's will build up on wooden surfaces and it can get gummy if you use it full strength, so don't.

If you like the way it smells, you can use regular Simple Green, diluted in a spray bottle, on cupboard surfaces of all kinds. It's gentle and probably won't harm anything, but it does have a distinct fragrance that some people don't like. Dilute it well with water to mitigate the scent.

If you like going natural, use a damp cloth with a few drops of lemon essential oil and a dab of vinegar on wooden cabinets. It cleans well, smells heavenly and will actually serve to lift your spirits too. Lemon oil is recommended for cleaning most wood surfaces and will leave a nice shine. Just go easy.

Which brings me to our general rule on all products: go easy. First see what you can do with a damp cloth and then if necessary, use essential oils or whatever product you gravitate towards.

Bathroom:

Clean mirrors, wash down shower walls, floor, and tub inside and out. Clean sinks and countertops, scrub commode inside and out. Clean the floor and wipe the floorboards. Use a wet pumice stone to erase hardwater stains inside tubs and toilet bowls. Empty trash. For more ingenious cleaning tips visit the cleaning tips section at **Start-Cleaning-Business.com**.

Dust everything and vacuum carpet:

Shake out small rugs (go outside to do this) or vacuum. Clean floors. Find and dust or clean hidden televisions with window cleaner and soft rag. Sometimes we go for weeks without noticing the 4th or 5th television in our clients' homes because it's inside a cabinet. Do people really need this many TVs? That's the subject of a whole 'nother ebook. Clean mirrors, furniture, dust the tops of lampshades, and anything else your client wants cleaned.

Empty trash and recycling bins in every room.

I know -- duh, right? Actually, they can be quite easy to forget, or even hard to find!

Things to do every second or third time you clean:

These are the tasks that can easily be alternated with each other. One week do the baseboards, the next do all the windowsills. For example, one week you might wipe down the baseboards and the tops of the super-high cupboards in the bathroom. The next time you might skip those tasks but dust the silk houseplants instead. The following time you would alternate and do the baseboards and super-high cupboards again, etc.

More tasks to alternate: Dust shelves, baseboards, windowsills, under the bed. Move tables and chairs and clean under their feet. Clean the feet too, or pull off dust bunnies and dog hairs that collect on them. Clean windows above kitchen sink, and windows in bathroom. Clean out tracks under sliding closet doors, glass doors and windows. Wipe down obvious splatters on blinds above kitchen sink.

Some of your clients will teach you how to clean their homes -- people are gems full of information if we listen. Bob taught us that the corners of his shower need a little spray bleach once every two weeks or so, to prevent orange mold from forming. He also told us that Bon Ami is made of diatomaceous earth, or ground up seashells. I read that Bon Ami is made of feldspar and grated detergent, and that it's nontoxic and nonabrasive. Bob prefers it to Comet, which contains bleach, is abrasive and may scratch his new chrome faucet.

I know where Bob's coming from when he recommends bleach. He just wants to see no mold. None of us do! It's disgusting. And the longer it is allowed to grow the harder it will be to remove. But instead of bleach on the corners of the shower, I use tea tree oil and an old toothbrush. Tea tree essential oil is nontoxic, which means it will not harm me like bleach might, and it works. It works well. At first if the mold is really built on, you might use the bleach once or twice, but after that try tea tree oil and be amazed. I apply a small amount of it regularly to shower grout and the mold doesn't come back. I love that.

Cleaning Techniques

Work efficiently. When you know beforehand that something is going to take a lot of effort to

clean like a scummy shower door for example, spray it or soak it with a cleaner at the beginning of the job. Then return to the kitchen or whichever room you regularly begin in. By the time you are ready to scrub the shower door, you've given yourself a head start and it will clean up faster, better and with less effort.

Risky Products

"Do no harm" is a wise saying, as useful in cleaning as in other areas of life, such as raising children and driving to work. Familiarize yourself with the products you use and learn what risks are involved in using any cleaning agent. You are there to make your client happy with your cleaning job. You do not want to lose a job, and you never want to ruin their property through carelessness.

Slow down if you must and read the labels on the stuff you are using, before you use it. Do as the labels suggest, test an inconspicuous spot before using an unfamiliar product on an entire surface. Your clients are likely to want you to use commercial products with bleach to remove stains.

I can't say it enough: Use caution with anything that contains bleach. There are a lot of them, so read the labels. Some surfaces can withstand bleach, some cannot. Wooden toilet seats painted white look as if they could be bleached clean, but the white wood may stain yellow if you use bleach on it, probably not the result your client is seeking. Bleach will also ruin your clothes.

Toxic vs. Nontoxic Cleaning Products

(This issue is also discussed in the chapter called Basic Cleaning Kit, under the heading "Natural or Nasty?")

To go conventional or natural?

As we've said, our bias is toward using environmentally friendly products. This can be a selling point for some clients, but others do not care. And still others will mistake "friendly" with "wimpy." Without getting up on our soapbox (wink), we try not to risk losing a job over this sensitive issue. In general, we've learned not to tell people up front that we try to use alternative or nontoxic products. They may not hire us, thinking (mistakenly) that we may not do a good enough job on their stained toilet seats and their scummy shower doors.

We've found that most surfaces will get clean without the use of harmful products, but we think it best to let the client bring up the topic of toxic vs. nontoxic cleaning substances. The truth is, most of your clients won't be peering over your shoulder inspecting your work while you clean, so use what works. Here's a story to illustrate my point.

A client of ours recently left a jug of commercial brand calcium deposit remover out for us to

use on his shower doors. One glance at the warnings on the label (including cancer-causing, asthma-inducing gizmos of course, but only harmful if inhaled) and I knew I wanted to avoid opening that jug if at all possible.

I had brought along a product made by Simple Green that claimed to do the very same thing the nasty toxic product claimed to do. Since I generally enjoy breathing while scrubbing I was happy to see that it did indeed remove the mineral deposits on his chrome faucet and glass doors. I won't bother telling my client that I didn't have to resort to using the Super Cleaner he left for us. The goal was to clean off the mineral deposits and we did.

My preference is to use the safe, biodegradable product first, applied with a bit of elbow grease. If that doesn't work, I may consider using the other product. But if I do use harsh substances I remember to read the label, heed its warnings, and wear rubber gloves to protect my skin. And so should you.

More Cleaning Techniques for Specific Jobs

General cleaning: A good general rule of thumb is, start high, end low. What you don't catch with a sponge or a rag, gravity will bring to the floor. So clean the floor last. The one real exception with the starting high rule is in cleaning walls. Usually you don't have to clean walls at all or very infrequently. But if you do, remember to start low and scrub up the wall to keep from getting dirty streak marks running down.

Floors:

Vacuum or sweep up the crumbs and whatnot. Wipe the floor with a damp towel or rag. EGADs (another one of Evan's Genuine Amazing Discoveries): Contrary to popular belief, mops are kind of worthless. They lose strings, leave streaks and don't give you enough control to do a satisfactory job. They usually get the floors way too wet, which can be disastrous if you're cleaning a polished marble floor or a wood floor. For both of those types, use as little water as you possibly can.

Instead of a mop, we use a Swiffer that breaks down into portable parts, and attach a microfiber cloth to it. Mop the floor with that. You can spot clean with the blue scrubber, the textured sponge for stuck-on lumps of goo.

Clean baseboards, window tracks, and tiny dirty corners with a corner of your microfiber rag, by hand. This is a lot of work but it's worth it. You won't have to do more than once a month, usually, and it's one of those details that will help you create job security because clients love to see clean tracks under their sliding doors and windows. Use a small screwdriver covered with a rag or paper towel to get at impossibly small corners.

Dog hair:

Yuck. There's no question, a house full of free floating hair is a challenge to keep clean. I used to detest dog hair, capable of coating every surface known to humankind. Now I try to remember that their dog hair is probably the number one reason they need our cleaning service. In other words, their dog hair is our bread and butter.

Kisses, our Dachshund friend, has long black hair that coats his owners' white tile kitchen counters, the walls, floors and pretty much everything else. Before attempting to clean floors, sinks, or countertops, wipe up the dog or people hair with a paper towel. If possible, hit it with the vacuum cleaner before you clean. This will keep dog hair from driving you batty and make cleaning a lot easier. It's also more efficient because you're not cleaning up from your cleaning job, which you can't escape if there's a bunch of dog hair on your cleaning cloth.

Why is it that other people's dogs smell worse than our own darling pets? I jest, but honestly that Eau d'Dog fragrance is overwhelming, isn't it?

Here's a brilliant trick for masking that unattractive doggy odor wafting from the vacuum cleaner. Apply 5 or 6 drops of essential oil directly to the vacuum bag before using. Lemon or orange oil is a good antidote for any smelly animal odor.

You'll be amazed how well it works. We carry a diluted mix of lavender oil and water in a mister and spritz it into the air every once in awhile. I mist my face after jobs too. What the heck.

Start-Cleaning-Business.com has an excellent assortment of cleaning tips that we update frequently. We put them there for you so definitely check it out.

You have learned:

General cleaning techniques

Tasks to alternate every time and every other time you clean.

Our preference for natural, nontoxic cleaning products.