

Expert opinion

Three steps to effective contracts

By John Culotta



Summer is here, and so is the busy time for pest management professionals (PMPs). Before you get too preoccupied with those looming termite calls, it's important to examine your contracts, as well as related processes and communications. Here are three ways to better utilize a contract:

1. Improve contract language.

Contracts are a major factor in managing customer expectations and your risks, but they are effective only if you communicate clearly with your clients. As soon as possible, examine your contracts to make sure they are clearly worded. Industry jargon that seems clear to you may confuse clients.

More importantly, examine what's *in* your contracts. They should emphasize that there are no guarantees, and multiple treatments may be required. This contract language can set expectations and alleviate potential claims, because when a customer has realistic expectations, there is less room for dissatisfaction. Plus, this language gives you a better chance of defending yourself in the event of a claim.

Consider developing a contract specific to different pests. This is particularly relevant to bed bugs: Relatively risky methods like heat treatments call for specific, strong contract language.

2. Communicate clearly.

Don't skimp on conversation when introducing a contract to a client. Like accurate contract language, this will help you manage expectations.

Talk your customers through the contract, waiver and prep list to ensure they understand the paperwork, language and risks. Walk them through their home and explain specific risks, such as items that may be damaged by treatments.

Most importantly, let your customers know what to expect when they return to their home after the treatment process. Bed bug treatments, for example, often take multiple applications, so it is important to discuss with customers and address this in contracts. Reviewing these details may save questions, confusion and concern in the end. Plus, discussing items such as these can help make the claims process run smoothly — or prevent a claim from ever occurring in the first place.

3. Always follow up.

None of this effort matters if customers do not actually agree to the resultant contract. Do not start treatment until the customer signs all documentation, including the prep list and waivers of liability.

Once the treatment is complete, don't forget the follow-up phone call to check in with the client. Attention to customer service can make a big difference in easing clients' anxiety about an infestation, and it can help prevent claims.

If a second treatment is necessary, you should not be held accountable if a customer delays you. The combination of clear contract language, open communication and thorough follow-up will help you get back in time to effectively re-treat an infestation. If worse comes to worst, these measures can help prevent or lessen a claim.

Don't go out on another new customer visit without looking at your contract language and preparing yourself for a thorough walk-through and always follow-up. The extra time and attention will save you money in the long run.

John Culotta is Program Manager of PCOpro and PCOnova, the pest control operator programs at Brownyard Group (www.brownyard.com), a leading administrator providing specialized insurance coverage for select industry groups. He can be reached at jculotta@brownyard.com or by calling 800-645-5820, ext. 122.

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