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Getting started with bed bug treatments? 3 ways to avoid headaches

By JOHN CULOTTA

The pest management industry has just wrapped up another successful Bed Bug Awareness Week, during which businesses and trade groups tried to impart upon the public a bit of their bed bug wisdom. Through efforts such as these, it is safe to say the average person is more bed bug savvy than they were 10 years ago. Over the same period, pest management professionals (PMPs) have learned about, and adapted to, the ways of bed bugs, with new detection and treatment techniques.



But PMPs continue to face an array of challenges when treating for these pests — including the human element. If you are just getting started with providing bed bug services, these challenges may seem daunting. Fortunately, you can learn from the mistakes of others. To avoid reputation damage, costly insurance claims and other headaches, I recommend adopting the following strategies.

1. Educate the customer.

Many people can rattle off a great deal of bed bug trivia, like “did you know bed bugs can survive for weeks without a meal?” However, few understand the treatment protocols required to account for such wily behavior.

Equip your customers with critical information, such as what you know about how bed bugs behave and why their homes or businesses may require multiple chemical and heat treatments. Talk to them about why heat treatments are effective and the damage a heat treatment could cause to their belongings.

Plus, consider what sort of education you can provide as a community expert on bed bugs. Many pest management firms are making use of their websites and social media platforms to educate the public — Bed Bug Awareness Week is just one example of this.

2. Manage customer expectations.

While you are discussing the finer points of bed bug treatments with your customers, it is equally important to talk to them about the reality of bed bug treatments. Your contracts include language that makes it clear that multiple treatments may be necessary. But don't just hand them the contract; have a conversation with customers about how their hopes for an instantly pest-free home may meet with the reality of this intractable pest. Have them walk along with you as you conduct a visual inspection, take photos of infested areas and store these photos for later use.

Managing expectations begins well before the customer picks up the phone. You can establish a realistic attitude toward treatments in your marketing and web copy. Avoid making guarantees or promises you cannot keep, such as "our treatments are 100 percent effective on the first try." Such statements put you in a difficult position if a customer's home or business requires multiple treatments.

3. Prevent property damage.

You have explained to your customer how bed bugs behave, how heat treatments work and why multiple treatments may be necessary. So, you're ready to go, right? Unfortunately, there is more to it. Many treatments, particularly heat treatments for bed bugs, can cause property damage. We have seen insurance claims related to record collections, artwork and irreplaceable keepsakes destroyed by heat treatments.

In many of these cases, the temperature in a room being treated rose beyond recommended levels because a heat treatment device was improperly programmed or monitored. PMPs providing heat treatments should be trained in the protocols necessary to carry out treatments safely and effectively, and they should always monitor heating mechanisms.

Taking these measures may not prevent a customer from alleging you were negligent in your treatment, and you may still experience claims for property damage. When working with pesticides and high temperatures, these things happen. However, you may be able to reduce the severity of insurance claims. That could mean smaller settlements with customers, fewer bumps in your insurance premiums and a better reputation in your community.

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