

"We Had a Fire Last Night"

The phone rang. The Vince Morgan the owner of Vince's Pressure Washing, a kitchen exhaust cleaning company picked up the receiver, and introduced himself.

The words "*We had a fire last night,*" came over the line. No introduction, nothing, just those words.

The cleaner recognized the voice. Time stood still. An exhaust cleaner's worst nightmare. A restaurant he had recently cleaned had had a fire.

Stumbling for something to say to fill the void, Morgan asks, "when?"

"Last night, I said. Aren't you listening!" the restaurant owner replied testily.

"Sorry Joe, I meant, where?" Vince quickly corrected himself.

"The exhaust system, the whole thing went up. We are wiped out. Everything is gone. My building is gone. My memories." After a pause, he continued, "The fire department is still here watching to see that everything is out."

More silence.

After a time, Joe, the restaurant owner, abruptly announced, "The insurance investigator just showed up, I have to go," the line went dead.

Vince sat there for a minute, a millions thoughts racing through his mind. He had not been on the job the last time it was cleaned. He did not know for sure that it was done completely. He couldn't even remember which of his three foremen had done the job.

He knew it was a bad job, a popular mesquite char-broiler restaurant, in an old heritage building. The ductwork had been there forever, the cedar-shaked roof was grease-saturated around the fan from the drippings of a million t-bones. But we sprayed it off every time we went up there, didn't we? He thought to himself.

Vince quickly went to the file to see when the job was done last time. As he spotted the file and reached for it, the phone rang again. Grabbing the file, he came back to the phone.

"This is Collin Smith, from the Tribune-Newspaper. Are you aware of the fire that took out the SteakHouse Restaurant, last night?"

"Yes," he answered feebly, unsure of how this information could have got out so soon, but then again it was a small town and the Steakhouse was an old and very popular spot.

"Do you know the cause?" the caller asked.

Immediately suspicious, Vince snapped back, "Why ask me?"

"Well someone told me that you were the one who lasted cleaned the place and so I figured you would be able to help put some information forward?"

Vince's mind swam, "who told you, that"?

"Oh, then it is not true that you cleaned the exhaust system at the restaurant?"

"Yes, we do, but that doesn't have anything to do with it. I don't know what has happened and I can't help you." Vince quickly dropped the receiver back in the cradle, almost but not quite slamming it.

Shaking his head to get his thinking clear, he opened the file. Suddenly, the scanty contents scream out at him. Where is the documentation? Where are the messages telling the world that this place was a firetrap? That it was not up to code. That it should have been cleaned way more often. Why was there nothing in the file? Just some old invoices and a couple of hand written scribbles from his foremen, saying they needed more time to get the job done right. Vince sat there. How long had he been considering implementing a Follow-up Report policy for the company? He had talked about it with all his staff. They had resisted, because they didn't want any more paperwork. They said they cleaned the systems to bare metal anyway so what could there be to burn? And besides, they told the night manager of any problems, so the restaurant knew of them.

The phone rang again. He looked at it as it cycled again. Drawing a breath and calming himself, he deliberately picked it up and responded calmly, "Vince's pressure washing."

"Have you heard the radio?" It was his wife.

"No, but if you mean the Steakhouse, Joe called and told me. He was pretty upset. He wanted to know what I was going to do about it."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing really, he had to go. The insurance guy showed up as we were talking."

"You better get down there."

"Why? This can't have anything to do with us."

"You may think so, but if Joe called you, he must think differently."

Instantly seeing the logic of his wife's words, he nodded to himself. "I'll call my insurance agent first then head down there."

"Good, call me later."

He hung up without a good-bye.

Dialing his agent, Vince annoyingly listened to the rings and then the recorded message. Great, he thought, just when you need them. He left a message of what had happened and to call him and gave his cell phone number.

As he drew close to the fire site, he could see the fire trucks and a small crowd of people. He had to park a couple blocks away from the scene. Walking slowly up to the scene, he

was amazed at the mess. There was black dirty water everywhere and bits of black, burnt stuff laying along the edge of the sidewalk curb. The smell was foul and acrid.

As he came up to the building he saw wide yellow tape running all over the place. It was like one of those scenes you see on TV. The building was a write-off. Only two walls were still standing, the entire insides were gutted and black. The second story had collapsed and the wreckage was everywhere.

He watched a number of uniformed firemen going about their business. There was a small group of other men, discussing things. As he walked up to the group he spotted Joe, the Fire Chief and another man, dressed in a red jumpsuit. He watched, with a somewhat sour twist in his stomach as Joe spotted him coming and leaned over and spoke to the other men. He saw the expression on the men's faces change with Joe's words. Vince could see the "official" facemasks come down over their expressions.

Fortifying himself, he approached the group. After quick introductions, the men all stood around for a few minutes, as men are prone to do in these sort of situations; making idle, noncommittal conversation, most of the questions are directed at Vince. All the men exchange cards.

After a few minutes a fireman came up and addresses the Fire Chief, letting him know that all is clear and the site is safe to enter. With that the insurance investigator and the fire chief excuse themselves and head into the ruins.

Vince and Joe, now alone, stand there in silence.

Finally, Vince asks the obvious question, "What happened?"

Joe, looking tired and haggard answered woodenly, "I wasn't here, but the cook tells me that they were doing the clean up, and cleaning off the grill. He didn't know what happened but he suddenly saw fire up in the filters. He says he tried to put it out with the portable. But he says that it was behind the filters.

"He told the staff and everyone got out. That's all I know, now."

"Did he hit the Hood fire extinguisher?" Vince asks with apprehension.

"He says he did."

"Did it go off?"

"He said he didn't stick around to see, cause smoke was coming out of the ceiling and he could feel the heat above him."

Vince stood and watched from a distance as the two officials sorted through charred wreckage.

After a time Vince's insurance agent came up behind him. The two of them made their exit and walked over to a coffee shop a couple blocks away.

Sitting there over coffee, Vince's agent started asking questions.

"What kind of job was this?"

"It was a bad one. We told them a couple times that they needed to get cleaned more often, but they said every two months was enough. Sometimes they put us off to every three months. We told them they should get rid of the mesh filters and that there was a place that needed an access panel to clean." Vince said defensively.

"Who did you tell this to?"

Vince thought for a minute about the answer. He knew that his company had not followed up the way they should have, but still they had told the restaurant about the problem. "My guys told me that they told the night manager when they were in doing the job."

"When did you clean it last?" the agent asked.

"About 6 weeks ago."

"Do you have any records of the cleaning?"

"Sure, we have the invoices."

"Anything else, notes that you gave to the owner, written reports on the condition of the exhaust system, anything telling them they should be cleaned more often or there was places you couldn't get to?"

"No. Nothing we ever gave the restaurant."

"That's too bad." There was a long pause, until the agent asked delicately, "Don't you have a written policy for telling the customer about problems?"

"No." Vince answered, "We make a point of telling the customer of the problems."

"Okay," the agent placated, thinking to himself how best to approach this whole subject.

His agent spoke to him in earnest, "Look Vince, the way things are today, the insurance company's are suing everyone and thing possibly related to a fire. They know that cleaners are supposed to remove all the grease in those vents. So if there is any found, they call it Contributory Negligence. It sounds nasty, and I guess it is. What it means is that to some degree, something that was done, or not done by your company contributed to the amount of damage."

He let the thought hang in the air.

"Well, we'll know more once the investigation is over." The agent continued. "In the meantime we had better get someone in our corner to investigate this thing. My experience with claim losses, tells me this one is going to go in the millions, for sure."

The words were like a dagger in Vince's soul. He did not have that much insurance. What would happen? Would they come after his house? His business?

Vince had no answers, only questions and the haunting anger of knowing that he had told himself that he knew better. That he should have put something in place to cover his ass. But he always figured it would never happen. All vents have suppression systems these days and besides he was only the cleaner. The restaurant was responsible for seeing that everything was up to Code. Right?

It wasn't his fault. It couldn't be.

But from the look and tone of voice of his insurance agent he could see that they weren't going to share that view.

Sure, he had billed his company as one that prevents fires by removing the grease, but if you couldn't get to some of it what were you supposed to do? And besides if the restaurant had listened and had the system cleaned more often, then there would have been no problem. Right? Wrong, he told himself. He knew there were areas of that system that the crew could not get to and needed access. He realized the illogicalness, that cleaning it more often would not matter if there were serious areas that were not accessible.

The thought that this was not his fault, that it couldn't be, kept coming back to him. This sort of thing just can't happen. And it really just cannot be happening to **me!**

Back in his office, Vince urgently but methodically began going through all his company records and racking his brain for any other job that held the slightest risk of a fire. After a very short time he realized that a large portion of the jobs they did were risky. But that made sense didn't it. They were supposed to be in the grease removal business and grease was supposed to be combustible wasn't it? They sold their service as a fire prevention one. Now the reality of that had been driven home.

The phone rang several more times that day. No longer was it the sound of new business coming into the company. Now it was the sound of people asking questions. Suddenly this, vent cleaning wasn't that profitable anymore. Suddenly, it had put him at risk of financial ruin. Suddenly, it was serious.

By the end of the day, he had roughed out a simple form that would cover the worst of the problems the crews saw. And if they did not want to fill out the form they would be looking for another job. He didn't care how hard it was to get people to do this work.

This was going to be the law around here from now on!

That evening on the way home, he walked by a newsstand. It shouted in bold headlines.

Heritage Restaurant Burns - Poor Maintenance Suspected

That night, as he lay there trying to go to sleep the thought that this just could NOT happen just kept rolling around in his mind.

After a while he had to admit that, not only could it happen, it had happened and it happened to him. **Can it happen to you?**

Conclusion

Kitchen exhaust cleaning is looked at as a dirty job, but one that can be a real nice cash cow. Once you do a good job for a customer, they generally have you back. If you can get back before they get too dirty you can be in and out in reasonable time and make a good buck. But over time you will pick up jobs that you know are fire hazards. Ones with any of a dozen problems: mesh filters, type II ducts and hood, large inaccessible areas, greasy roofs, poor placement of cooking equipment, poor housekeeping and just plain poor attitudes towards having the system cleaned properly. Then there are always customers that only want a hood sticker and to have the visible areas cleaned.

These jobs put your business at risk.

It is one thing to try to do your best; it is another to know that you are not doing the whole job or that it is not constructed safely.

Basically, when you do these type of inferior jobs, you are saying to yourself "Am I feeling lucky?"

There is a new Certification Program required by the National Fire Protection Association #96 8-3.1.1 (1998 Edition) or 11.4.1 (2001 Edition). This Standard is now becoming more and more required and accepted by fire officials. Those vent cleaners who try to sneak by, by "feeling lucky" are going to find themselves and their businesses exposed to increasing lawsuits and insurance claims.

The insurance industry has picked up on the fact that cleaning these exhaust systems is not always done correctly. After a fire, insurance lawyers will file suit against everyone they can think of. More and more the vent cleaner is being called for accountability.

But there is a simple solution to at least part of the problem of doing exhaust systems that pose serious fire hazards. That solution is **Write It Down**. Make it a policy to fill out an After Service Follow-up Report at the end of every job.

Make your crew understand the magnitude of the risk. They are getting paid to remove combustible materials from the exhaust system. If they don't or can't clean the entire system to bare metal **for any reason**, the restaurant has the right to know. If there are areas that are inaccessible or if there are other obvious fire risks in, on, or about the kitchen exhaust system, the cleaner has a professional responsibility to report them to the owner of the restaurant. And it **must** be in WRITING! Saying that you told them will not cut it in a court of law.

By making it a policy of your company to provide a written After Service Follow-up Report for all of your customers, you are taking a responsible position in showing that you are concerned for their investment. It also helps to prove that you are a responsible, professional cleaning company and as such, an asset to the community you claim to serve. If you have a particularly bad job I strongly recommend that you send the Report to the customer by Registered Mail and keep a copy of the Registration.

The After Service Follow-Up Report is reasonably self-explanatory. If you need further clarification, feel free to get in touch with the author. The form is free of charge*. You can reproduce it, change or modify it in any way that will help you protect your business. The author provides it in an attempt to elevate the caliber of work performed in this service field. Use it and prosper.

*A modest charge may apply to cover production and shipping costs.

Phil Ackland is well known in the exhaust-cleaning field. He has written a series of instructional manuals on the field, including the Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning and Certification Manual and the Kitchen Ventilation Systems Guidelines of the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors, National Association.

He has assisted a number of associations develop and implement Certification Programs for kitchen exhaust cleaners. He sits as a voting member on the NFPA #96, committee. He has acted as a consultant and expert to a number of insurance company's on fire cases involving kitchen cooking equipment and ventilation systems.

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