

Bed Bugs: What's *Really* Working (Part 2)?

Editor's note: This article is a continuation of a two-part series launched in our March 2008 issue

By Paul J. Bello • Contributor

Regardless of how technically savvy and effective your bed bug program might be, it won't work well without proper cooperation from, and clear communication with, customers.

Defining responsibilities and setting expectations up front helps minimize hurdles and reduces the likelihood of reinfestations and costly callbacks.

"We need 100-percent cooperation of building management," affirms Scott McNeely of McNeely Pest Control, Winston-Salem, N.C. "When an apartment unit has bed bugs, we always inspect and treat all of the surrounding units. That takes good communication, with and full cooperation of, building management."

"We're concerned about all the reports we read regarding product efficacy and bed bug resistance," adds Stephen Gates, director of technical services at Cook's Pest Control in Decatur, Ala. "Because of this, we make sure we treat surrounding units of multi-family housing and hotel accounts *before* we treat the

infested units. We don't want to chase bed bugs from infested units into untreated ones."

Ed Van Istendal, operations manager for Tomlinson Bomberger's Pest Control Division in Lancaster, Pa., notes that the most important information pest management professionals (PMPs) need to communicate to property owners is that furniture and belongings will be moved or dismantled during the course of inspections and treatments. This includes beds, frames, bedding, nightstands, outlets, switches, drawers, books, CDs and DVDs, among other items.

"No stone should be left unturned," Van Istendal says. "The spot you miss is the spot that will result in a failed treatment."

McNeely agrees: "It's not the 95 percent of the bed bugs that we see and kill that are going to be the problem. It's the 5 percent we can't find."

Customers need to know what to expect and be informed of their responsibilities and what they can do to enhance results.

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“We provide our customers with a list of instructions they need to follow before we do the work,” says Mike Deutsch, technical director for Lynbrook, N.Y.-based Arrow Exterminating. “We have them sign off on the job preparation instructions to assure they understand what needs to be done.”

WHAT CUSTOMERS CAN DO

“We instruct customers to remove bed linens, but leave the bed and box springs in place because we do not want them to move infested items from room to room or apartment to apartment,” offers Lynn Frank, technical director at Suburban-Magic Exterminating in Smithtown, N.Y. “We have them carefully place the bed linens directly into plastic bags placed on the beds so bed bugs are not disturbed or moved from the mattresses or bed frames.”

Joe Kennedy, vice president of Arrow Exterminating in Lynbrook, points out that many PMPs are issuing a list of customer preparation steps that include placing clothing in plastic bags, removing bed linens and laundering them in hot cycles, clearing clutter from under beds and protecting fragile and valuable items.

Preparing for bed bug jobs requires a lot of work — teamwork. Some customers might not have the time or the ability to do all of the necessary preparations themselves. Smart PMPs offer to help them, sometimes for an additional charge.

“Let’s face it, we’re not going to get 100-percent cooperation from everyone 100 percent of the time,” Kennedy says. “We might need to help some customers more with preparations, but that’s just a part of being in the service business.”

TRAINING & EDUCATION IS NEEDED

More technician training and customer education is needed.

“All of our technicians are properly trained for bed bug control”, says Richard Diggs, president of Alexandria (Va.) Pest Services. “We have been doing a lot of bed bug work in the Washington D.C.-to-Baltimore area with great success that we credit to our excellent training program.”

“Until recently, most of our technicians had not even seen a live bed bug,” reports Justin Knox, vice president of Knox Pest Control, Columbus, Ga.. “We made sure we provided bed bug training that included live bed bugs and on-site field training for them to gain valuable experience.”

While it’s true that many of today’s PMPs have yet to encounter live bed bugs, sometimes it’s because our customers don’t know they have pest issues — nevermind bed bug infestations.

“One of our customers thought she had a bad case of poison ivy and went to her doctor,” recalls Yvonne Cadell of Co-operative Exterminating in Marietta, Ga. “Even her doctor did not realize that what she really had was bed bugs. After about one year, she found what she thought were ticks in her house and called us for help. These ticks turned out to be bed bugs.”

In addition to supplying customers with treatment preparation lists, responsible PMPs are creating information sheets for their customers that include details on bed bug biology, behavior, recognition, identification and related integrated pest management technologies and techniques. Seasoned veterans also supply bed bug accounts with photographs of the cryptic, bloodsucking pests so their clients will be better prepared to recognize and deal with infestations.

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BEWARE OF LIABILITY

“You need to have well-drafted contracts with proper disclaimers to adequately protect from potential liabilities when dealing with something as elusive as a bed bug,” says Cliff Slaten of Slaten & O’Connor in Montgomery, Ala.

There already have been some cases related to bed bugs. In light of this, Slaten advises that contracts should be written to protect PMPs from actions from third-party relations. Legal experts agree it’s possible guests who stay in hotels where PMPs provide service might name PMPs in bed bug lawsuits.

The University of Kentucky’s Michael Potter takes it a step further, noting PMPs should be careful about what they promise in their service offerings.

“Get with your attorney to make sure your service agreement says what you intend,” Potter notes.

Experts agree that under today’s conditions, bed bug infestations can be difficult to eliminate. In some cases, bed bugs

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Time to Train Commercial Accounts, Too

While bed bugs are back, it’s surprising how many of those affected by them actually have never seen a live bed bug before. Clearly, it would be beneficial if folks beyond pest management professionals (PMPs) became more familiar with these pests and the tell-tale signs of bed bug activity.

Hotel, motel and resort housekeeping staffs, institutional and other commercial building maintenance staffs, healthcare professionals and others trained to recognize bed bug activity might be able to provide timely sightings before problems escalate at commercial accounts.

“One of the best things we did was to train our resort housekeeping and maintenance staff on where and what to look for,” confirms an in-house pest manager at a large resort facility. “They are in the rooms more often than the pest management technicians are, and add an extra set of eyes to our pest management program staff on a daily basis. With the number of units we have, it would be difficult to inspect all of our rooms on a preventative basis with the staff we have.”

At another property, housekeeping staff training is credited as the single most important aspect of the bed bug management program. PMPs conducted a training class for the housekeeping staff, and printed job aids, posters and handouts were provided to assist with the success of the program. A PMP is called when a member of the housekeeping or maintenance staff has any suspicions of bed bug activity, providing an early call to action. One manager reported that only about 2 percent of the rooms reported by housekeeping actually have had bed bugs and that having housekeeping involved has cut guest-initiated bed bug calls by more than 90 percent.

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might go quietly after treatments, only to resurface months later.

“Just because your post-treatment inspection doesn’t reveal any bed bugs does not necessarily mean you’ve gotten them all,” Potter cautions.

PROPER INVESTIGATION & FOLLOW-UP

It’s helpful to know the nature of each account when you’re dealing with any pest, and bed bugs are no exception.

“We use a customer questionnaire that helps us to gain a better understanding of exactly where we are in the bed bug infestation and management process with each customer,” says Rick Cooper, technical director of Cooper Pest Solutions in Lawrenceville, N.J.

Among other information, Cooper Pest Solutions’ survey can gauge: how long the problems have been going on; when the customers first noticed issues; which rooms have been problematic; who is getting bitten; who lives in the structures (children, elderly, pets); and whether there have been any recent house guests and/or travel taken recently.

It might not be possible to find every bed bug in an account. That’s why successful PMPs conduct follow-up inspections and include customers’ observations as part of their programs.

“We want to know if they’ve been bitten or seen any bed bugs and when,” Cooper says. “This helps us to understand whether we’ve been successful in our treatment programs.”

Bed bugs are so stealthy that PMPs need to be thorough and conduct sufficient follow-up to ensure customers’ pest situations have been solved. In the case of multi-family housing, an ongoing program is likely necessary to prevent reinfestations.

“We’ve been burned at a property before”, reports a property management professional, “and we wish to avoid that ever happening again. This is why we have our units on a quarterly rotational service to assure that every unit is inspected and serviced regularly to prevent any pest problems from getting ahead of us”. **PMP**

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