

Transformation

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By Robert Kravitz

New York City has gone through a transformation in the past 30 years. Glamorous in the 1920s, '30s and '40s, it went through some pretty rough and grimy times in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. The city was in such dire straits 35 years ago that it is doubtful New York would have been even remotely considered for the “fifth character” in the television series and movie *Sex in the City*.

The city’s Port Authority Bus Terminal has also been transformed in the past couple of decades, and in many ways, its changes parallel what has occurred throughout the city. In the 1980s, the more than 200,000 commuters using the facility each day had to contend with homeless people, filth and street crime. Stores and shops in the building were “cheap and tawdry,” according to one commuter, and the restrooms, which tended to be poorly maintained, also reflected the sad state of affairs. Commuters avoided them at all costs.

“I don’t think we could have gotten any lower,” says John Brendlen Jr., who was the real estate manager for the facility at that time. “Commuters stepped off their busses...kept their heads down, and scurried through [the building] as quickly as possible.”

Today the scene is completely different. Most of the homeless people are gone, many upscale shops have relocated here and they are patronized by well-dressed patrons who now feel safe in the facility — many of whom now consider parts of the first floor of the Port Authority a trendy shopping mall.

And the facts speak for themselves. Although the facility was once considered “untouchable,” some high-end retailers have moved in; rents have gone up dramatically and now rival those in Penn Station, which was always considered the most desirable of the city’s three commuter stations. And surveys reveal that while 43 percent of the terminal’s customers in the early 1990s reported being accosted or bothered by homeless people, beggars or drunks, less than 15 percent reported such experiences by the mid to late 1990s, and that figure is even lower today.

How’d They Do It?

A number of steps were taken to end the Port Authority Bus Terminal’s sad state of affairs. Mediocre stores and tenants were weeded out, others spruced up their locations, and trendy and more quality stores moved in. The homeless people were not just evicted. The Port Authority set up programs to find them

housing and also took steps to prevent new homeless people from moving in. “And places where people could just hang out, lie on the floor, or lean up against walls were removed,” Brendlen says.

Police enforcement was beefed up with more than 150 police officers added, working in the station and the surrounding Times Square area. Within a year reported crime dropped by half and has gone down ever since. Improvements in the surrounding neighborhood also bode well for the station. Pornography shops have been replaced by a Disney Theater, a renovated 42nd Street Theater, Madame Tussauds and a major hotel directly across the street.

Not to be forgotten, the operation and maintenance of the building has also changed considerably. More and brighter lighting systems have been installed throughout the facility, floors are cleaned more frequently and thoroughly and a greater emphasis has been placed on restroom cleaning.

For instance, instead of sporadic cleaning attention throughout the day, many of the busiest restrooms in the facility had their own cleaning attendant stationed in the restroom most of the day. This was increased further in 2005 when a \$6 million program was launched to, among other things, enhance cleaning, especially in the restrooms. The goal is to improve not only the appearance of the restrooms — which it is believed will further increase customer satisfaction and make using the terminal a more pleasant experience — but the health of the facilities as well.

Does “Looks Clean” Mean Clean

“There is another parallel evolving here as well,” says John Richter, a research engineer at Kaivac Inc., developers of the No-Touch Cleaning system and a presenter at this year’s Cleaning Industry Research Institute (CIRI) symposium. “In the 1980s and 1990s, the cleaning industry was focused on appearance. Our job was to make buildings look good. Today, that is actually secondary. Now our goal is to help keep facilities healthy. We call it being hygienically clean.”

This is essentially the view of CIRI and other leading professional cleaning groups and institutions. Cleaning, they say, has been redefined in recent years, mostly because of concerns about MRSA, SARS and the spread of other diseases and infections. Some cleaning experts even believe the cleaning industry should be placed under the umbrella of the healthcare industry because it is so crucial to keeping people healthy.

Hygienically clean is a concept that was given little attention when the Port Authority Bus Terminal was first beginning its transformation. This is mainly because the technology to “prove” a surface is clean, sanitary and free of microorganisms that could cause disease and infection was just not practical.

Other than tests using such things as petri dishes, which were slow and usually required a trained technician, the only systems available that could relatively quickly tell if a surface was free of contaminants were ATP (adenosine triphosphate bioluminescence) monitoring systems. Using these systems, cleaning crews or facility managers can better detect the presence of microscopic organic matter, or bio-pollution, which can indicate the presence of germs.

ATP is found in all living cells. Finding it on a surface such as a floor or countertop or on a “high-touch” area such as a light switch, toilet or faucet handle is often a red flag that potentially harmful germs and bacteria are present. However, the first ATP systems were large, expensive and slow by today’s standards.

Fortunately, in recent years, these systems have become much smaller — about the size of a television remote control — more cost effective, easier to use and able to report results in as little as 15 seconds. “A surface can look clean, but by using an ATP system, we can determine if it is really clean,” says Richter. “This provides us with scientific proof. [It] is the first step in hygienic cleaning and [a way] we can help prevent the spread of disease and infection in public restrooms and facilities.”

Hygienic Cleaning Put into Practice

Richter says that many conventional cleaning systems such as mops, buckets and microfiber cleaning cloths simply do not remove contaminants from surfaces and that this can be proved using the ATP system. Even worse, studies indicate these older systems may actually be spreading contaminants from one surface to another rather than removing them.

Instead, Richter recommends that facility managers and custodial professionals working in large facilities such as bus stations, airports, train stations and similar locations consider the following cleaning systems:

- For a variety of surfaces including floors, restrooms and food-preparation areas, high-flow fluid-extraction systems work well. These combine automatic chemical metering and injection, an indoor pressure washer and a wet vacuum into a single integrated system. Tests indicate they can be as much as 60 times more effective in reducing bacterial contamination than conventional cleaning tools, such as buckets and mops.
- For nonfloor flat surfaces, such as counter tops, walls, even partitions, flat surface cleaning (FSC) systems are recommended. These incorporate motorized chemical injection to apply diluted cleaning chemicals and disinfectants onto a microfiber applicator pad. The surface is wiped down with the microfiber pad, and a handheld squeegee is used to remove the cleaning solution, simultaneously removing contaminants as it dries the surface.
- Finally, for irregular or sensitive surfaces and touch points, such as keyboards, telephones, door handles, remote controls, call buttons, bed controls and railings in hospitals, disposable wipes work well. Some wipes have just been introduced for the professional cleaning industry that allow users to add their own cleaning or disinfectant solution. This enhances flexibility and is cost effective. The refillable wipes can also be used dry.

To prove the effectiveness of these cleaning systems and the use of ATP monitoring devices, Richter references a study he conducted at an elementary school. In this study, some school desktops were cleaned with a new, microfiber cleaning cloth sprayed with a properly diluted cleaning chemical, using a circular cleaning motion. Another set of desktops was cleaned using the FSC system.

After cleaning, the desktop surfaces were tested for both bacteria and ATP levels. These were the results:

- Before cleaning, average bacteria count on the desktop surfaces was approximately 4,400.
- The surfaces cleaned with the cleaning cloth alone had a bacterial count of 154; those cleaned using the FSC system had a count of 1.
- Before cleaning, the average ATP level on the surfaces was approximately 4,000.
- Surfaces cleaned with the microfiber cloth alone had an ATP reading of 271; those cleaned using the FSC system had a reading of 9.

Cleaning Science and the Cleaning Worker

One of the benefits of adding more science to cleaning is that it appears to be elevating the role of the cleaning worker. This is true whether the location is the busy Port Authority, an office, a school or a hotel. Put simply: with science, cleaning workers realize just how valuable they are to public health helping to make them feel more necessary and professional

“If I could make a suggestion to the managers of the Port Authority Bus Terminal, it would be to advise your cleaning personnel of this [how valuable they are to public health],” says Richter. “When cleaning workers fully understand this, my experience has been that their performance, along with the appearance and health of facilities reach new heights.”

Robert Kravitz is a writer for the professional cleaning, building and healthcare industries.



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