



by Lorne Tontegode

# Memo to Management

When I was about to become a dad, I couldn't tell the difference between a floppy disk and a hard drive. I decided I didn't want to face a future where my child would know more about computers than I did, so, I bought one and started to play around with it. This was 22 years ago and I have never regretted it. Computers have changed my life, and I have been able to stay ahead of my daughter.

I am shocked to see how many people in the dry cleaning industry don't have computers in their plants. If you are one of these, I urge you to make the effort to become computer literate. If you have a computer at your front counter, you will have information to operate your business more efficiently. But even if you don't do this, there are many ways available by computer to benefit your business. To put it bluntly: If you are not online, you are missing out big time.

## HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT

You have a problem in your plant. If you are a member of the Fabricare Forum on the internet, you have access to a very large group of professionals in your industry who are available to deal with your problem. You will have fellow dry cleaners, suppliers and consultants jumping in to give you advice. They may not all agree on the solution to your problem, but you will receive invaluable information from people you can trust. And it doesn't cost you a cent.

It's like the conversations you may have at trade shows or industry meetings. Often the advice and information you receive in casual conversation is more valuable than the event itself.

All you have to do is register online at <http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/fabricare/>. Then you can start to participate. Be careful though as you get involved, because there is a certain amount of protocol to follow. It is like joining into a conversation midway – you don't know what has already been discussed. Loiter around a bit and 'listen' to the conversations. The webmaster will send you a Bill of Rights about what is acceptable (honest information) and what is not (personal attacks and commercials).

Once you become involved in the group you will notice that it is not unlike day-to-day conversations. There are always new problems being brought up, and when you disagree with some of the advice or have a problem, that's when you are motivated to jump in.

## EQUIPMENT AVAILABLE

Another aspect of online lifestyle is the 'buy and sell' markets. You won't find a multitude of dry cleaning items for sale, but you will find some. I have known of many people who have found tremendous deals online. But if it seems too good to be true, it probably is. One of my customers picked up a never-used, still crated Renzacci dry cleaning machine for half the price of a new one. There are other industry websites selling equipment, including those featured in this magazine.

If you want to try online shopping, you can put dry cleaning equipment in your search engine or go to [www.ebay.ca](http://www.ebay.ca) and indicate the Dry Cleaning – Laundromat section.

## CONTACTING CUSTOMERS

How about reaching out to your customers? Do you have your own website? Twitter account? Email? Blog? This all may be like a foreign language to some of you, so let's have a look at them.

**Websites** are becoming increasingly important. If you don't have a site, you will not be getting the 'good' customers who are looking for you. Customers who are willing to pay for quality work are also

going online to look for websites in their area. They want to see what you have to offer before visiting your store. They also want to feel connected by having read about your business. There are many people who can create a website for you. Just ask around.

**Twitter** is an internet, social networking service that allows you to send small (140-character) messages or 'tweets' to customers who sign up to receive them. For example, you might invite customers to sign up at your Twitter account to receive notification of when you are running specials. You can notify individual customers when their order is ready or when it is on the delivery truck.

The advantage of Twitter over email is that customers must sign up for it. And you do not have to maintain the mailing list. You can contact an individual or everyone on your site in a much more efficient manner than maintaining a list of email addresses. You can send and receive tweets from a computer; you don't have to do it from a mobile phone. If you search for Twitter on a computer, you will find a detailed, easy-to-understand explanation of this truly groundbreaking communication medium that can put you close to your customers.





by David Tessler

**Email** has the advantage of not putting a limit on the length of the message, as Twitter does, but you need to obtain and maintain the address list customers have given you. On Twitter, the people who want to receive your messages post their addresses themselves.

**Blogs** are unique. The acronym stands for weB Log. It is like a diary to which you contribute regularly. You can share behind-the-scenes information about your business, discuss the best fabrics to buy, fashion details to avoid, problem trims. In other words, the advice no one asks for across the counter, but you wish they would.

You might be surprised about how much you have to say, and your customers will gain knowledge that is useful to both of you. If you, or someone in your family, enjoys writing, why not give it a try?

#### IN CONCLUSION

Each method of reaching customers has its advantages and disadvantages. You will likely want to try them all to give your company the most exposure. Some customers may prefer one medium over another. If you use them all, you will reach more current and prospective customers.

If you are technically savvy, get out there and start to participate. If you have resisted computers so far, realize that this is a tool that can help your business to grow. Look on it as a wise business decision to get involved. It is truly the way of the future, which has turned out to be groundbreaking for businesses. Don't be afraid. You can't break anything using social networking, but if you are really nervous, do it with a non-company computer for now. Jump in and get involved. And your young relatives will be impressed. ■

Lorne Tontegode is the president of FreeLoader recovery systems. He can be reached at 416-460-6338.

# The mysterious case of the disappearing dry cleaner

The store sits empty, a For Lease sign, now faded, remains in the front window. A small family once enjoyed a nice living in this community as dry cleaners, a situation now repeated in large cities and small towns across our country. Where did they go? What happened to their business?

Get out your magnifying glass, put on your Sherlock Holmes cap. Probably the greatest villain is the changing lifestyle. You can see the evidence at your local bank; where clerks were once impeccably dressed, they now come to work in blue jeans – and, horror of horrors, in one bank in sweatsuits adorned with the bank logo. When was the last time you saw people wearing dry-cleanable garments on an evening out?

Perhaps this is only the result of our neglect, and not the cause in itself. Dry cleaners became the butt of comedian's jokes, and we did not respond. Probably we laughed with the audience. The warning signs have been evident for a long time and the industry, as a group, took no action.

Fewer than five percent of the current operators can call themselves professional. They are easy to find because they are the only plants prospering today. They generally have highly skilled help and pay them well. Many on their staff can be called artisans, because of their experience in the industry. Moreover, these operators understand the concept of marketing.

The store windows are not covered in unrelated, low-quality advertising, but instead announce their own skills. The call office is bright and inviting. You will also find bright and knowledgeable attendants who respect your clothing and understand the difference between what can be cleaned and what cannot. Often their prices reflect the customer's willingness to pay for high-quality dry cleaning.

At the other end of the spectrum are the plants where prices have not kept up with increasing rents and operating costs. The owners do not have the business sense to ask for a reasonable return. It is almost as if they compete from plant to plant to see how small a return they can live on. When they get tired of working 'for the landlord', they sell the operation to another sucker. Here we find operators where the spotting board is covered in dust and cobwebs because they have never taken the trouble to learn basic spotting techniques. Further damaging their ability to compete are the shortcuts they must take in the operation just to keep their head above water.

These operators have pulled our industry down. They routinely generate bad quality, resulting from dirty solvent, unchanged filters, hard press pads, ignorance of fabrics and stain-removal procedures.

Another guilty party is the allied trades. Here we find equipment salesmen with no ethics, and profit above all else. Once there were supply salesman you could rely upon for advice and product training. Many have been replaced by mail order suppliers who offer no service beyond shipping goods. Where is the supplier who could tell you that your

assembly method is out of date, or that your tag system is costing you lost orders and claims, or perhaps introduced you to the latest miracle detergent?

I have been servicing the industry for 55 years, and have watched it grow from belt-driven petroleum washers to the ultra-modern perc and hydrocarbon units of today. I'm proud to have been associated with the best plants in B.C., but also saddened by the many that have gone out of business or are about to do so.

There's really no mystery behind the disappearance of many dry cleaners. The only mystery is why we don't learn from their mistakes and prosper as a result. ■

David Tessler, son of one of the founders of the famed Tessler Brothers of Vancouver, has been a keen observer of the industry for many years. He currently works for Prairie Distributors.

## APPLICATIONS ACCEPTED for DLI Scholarship for 2011

This full-tuition scholarship is available to any Canadian, 18 years or older, who is working in a dry cleaning operation. Called the Tom Kimmel Memorial Scholarship, it requires the winner to attend the full three-week course at one time and to assume the expenses for travel, lodging and food.

Applicants should send a letter stating why they would like to attend to: **Fabricare Canada, Box 968, Oakville, ON L6J 5E8.**