



THE LAUNDROMAT GUYS
GROWING PROFITABLE LAUNDRY BUSINESSES

IS THE CUSTOMER ALWAYS RIGHT?

Your staff and signage go a long way in establishing the proper behavior

The customer is always right. We've all heard it, and to a large degree it should be true. That is right up to the point that it gets in the way of your main goal, which is running a successful self-service laundry.

While all owners would love to sit down with their customers and go through some training (just imagine the topics we could cover — proper loading, wiping up spills; oh, the possibilities!), we are left with a couple of tools to govern customer behavior.

GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT

Start with signage. It may seem like a passive way to manage customer behavior, but it's not. You have to look at the signs in your laundry as the cornerstone of setting standards for conduct in the business. They will also be the best way for attendants to show that all customers are held to the same standards.

For example, a customer may be using foul language while children are present. Certainly, your well-trained, professional attendant will no doubt approach said customer and ask that person to watch their language or they'll have to leave. Now there's always the possibility of the customer falling back on the "You're just picking on me because I'm (insert whatever ethnic, religious, gender or other perceived bias here.) Good signage will be your attendant's best-friend tool for countering this argument. They can simply point to the sign and say, "These are the standards we apply to all customers."

Obviously, the attendant is a key component in this example and other situations your store will encounter. So since we agree we can't bring in our customers for training, how do we ensure our new laundry has staff who knows what's expected of them? Some in the business will tout the need for creating an employee manual. Nice in theory, but since most of us don't work in HR or want to, I see this as an unnecessary tool. In my stores, I've found it's more beneficial to break things down to some simple guidelines such as:

- Treat others, customers and co-workers like you want to be treated.
- Act within the best interests of the store. That means using good judgment. If a customer has forgotten to add an item and asks for a re-start of a machine, that's good customer service. If someone appears to be abusing such service, we need to educate them.
- Be honest.
- When you are not sure what to do, use common sense.

None of these guidelines are groundbreaking, but they encompass the essence of what you should expect from your attendants. Of course, I tell new owners to expect that, as simple as these standards seem to be to follow, 80 percent of their hires won't be there in a few months. Some will leave on their own, and others you will ask to leave.



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IT'S CLEAR TO SEE

When it comes to signage, we don't need the Magna Carta, just simple rules that I believe should be written in both English and Spanish. They will fall under four areas — use of the facility, use of the machines, behavior, and responsibility. A few “must-haves” include:

- 1) Customers should check machines before and after use.
 - We are not responsible for lost or damaged items.
 - We are not responsible for items left behind.
 - We may remove items left in machines when necessary.
- 2) Customers must check pockets for items before using machines.
- 3) Abusive or offensive behavior will not be tolerated.
- 4) We know you love your children, but maybe not someone else's. Children are the guardian's responsibility — no running, climbing, yelling or any unsafe behavior is permitted.
- 5) No soliciting or loitering under any circumstances is permitted.

The fourth rule may have some new owners thinking that a kiddie play area may be the best means to keep little ones from tearing up the store. I'm all for a children's area, but I encourage owners to stay away from a play area that includes slides or climbing toys. These types of activities can open owners up to liability concerns. I'd opt instead for a separate space with seating and perhaps its own TV, along with toys, games and books.

LET'S ALL GET ALONG

Now with the proper signage setting the tone for the store and staff well versed on your expectations for their conduct, it's time to open for business. My next bit of advice as it relates to customers and attendants may be difficult to follow — relax. Like a fine wine, let the store “breathe.” Each store is different, and owners should let theirs develop its own personality.

You'll get an idea of the customer base, area where you may see problems, and how attendants interact with customers. It should be a benevolent dictatorship. Everyone makes mistakes, but it's up to you and your staff to correct them and learn from these situations. This may mean adding to your posted policies, adding additional signage, or fine-tuning expectations for staff.

By this point you may be wondering about refund policies and ensuring profits stay in the store. Well, I'm a huge believer in card payment systems, and I think they eliminate many theft problems. It is, however, incumbent upon owners to monitor when and why machines are being started, to utilize a log, and to review surveillance images to verify the data. There are many ways to do this. Again, it's important to stress to staff the customer is always right ... sometimes. If customers continue to make the same mistakes, part of the blame falls on them as well as the staff for not helping them learn the first few times it comes up.



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What it all boils down to is responsibility and personality. Customers must take responsibility for their actions, and we must take responsibility for a clean, well-run establishment. Enforcing standards in a constructive, friendly manner — not critical or personal — will enable the customers to learn without being offended. That is the biggest benefit of training. Signs reinforce the verbal admonishment. Executing anything less and expecting anything more will hurt your business right from the start.