

The Boston Globe

Cleaning isn't just cleaning anymore. It's a major consumer confidence play

Retailers, office buildings, maybe even public transit will be disinfecting in plain sight to reassure the public

By [Adam Vaccaro](#), [Janelle Nanos](#) and [Tim Logan](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 25, 2020, 6:10 p.m.



Steve Birch (left) and Drew Bowman of BIOCLEAR, a cleaning company, sprayed common area last week at the Radius apartments on Brighton. David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

As the Massachusetts economy begins to reopen, expect to see cleaning crews just about everywhere.

Custodians will be tending to elevators throughout the day, while wiping down counters between transactions will be a crucial part of sales clerks' jobs. Sanitation work that used to be done when nobody was looking will now be put front and center like office decor.

There are obvious practical reasons for this — drowning the coronavirus in disinfectant, for one. Plus, the state's reopening plan includes [strict sanitary requirements](#) as industries come to life.

But business leaders and property managers also see another reason to make cleaning highly public, one that is more psychological: boosting the confidence of consumers and workers who worry about returning to public life as the virus circulates. There may be nothing quite as reassuring as the pinching odor of Lysol.

“You want to put those cleaners in front of people when they’re cleaning common areas,” said Megan Calabrese, director of property management at FoxRock Properties, a Quincy-based firm that owns a number of office buildings on the South Shore. “You want to give tenants a level of comfort.”

That kind of reassurance will likely be necessary to help a weary — and wary — public return to a more normal life. Polling in Massachusetts and elsewhere has shown widespread concern about returning to many aspects of life as it was, from eating at restaurants to going to the movies to riding public transit.

Meanwhile, recent surveys from the consulting giant McKinsey & Company have found that, once government restrictions are lifted, many US consumers see store hygiene as a major determinant in deciding where to shop.

“When you see consumers saying to us that they’re only going to feel safe once [companies] start taking safety measures, you can imagine stores will want to show what they’re doing so consumers for sure know what’s happening,” said Tamara Charm, a senior expert with McKinsey.

Josh Feinberg, president of the newly formed industry group Cleaning Coalition of America representing seven national sanitation firms, said cleaning companies are forecasting a 30 percent increase in demand over the coming months, which could lead to an industry hiring spree as more buildings reopen. Also, much of the work is expected during daytime hours — a big change from the past, when most cleaning efforts were deliberately kept out of sight.

“Prior to March, we were an invisible work force, and purposely so,” said Feinberg, who is an executive vice president at the sanitation company ABM. “It was like, ‘Hey, you guys can just clean at night, we don’t need to see you walking around here doing this.’”

Already, some essential businesses such as grocery stores have stationed workers near entrances so shoppers can see them wiping down carts. TJX Companies said it would be implementing new cleaning regimens throughout the day, with an emphasis on high-touch surfaces, such as PIN pads and shopping carts. And major companies are rolling out campaigns — such as Marriott’s “Commitment to Clean” — to tout their stepped-up efforts around disinfection and safety.

These initiatives are now likely to filter to smaller, nonessential businesses as they open. Some, including restaurants, may have a head start.

“Restaurants and bars have always been held to a higher standard, and from the moment you start working in any restaurant, all of the essential steps of sanitation are drilled into you,” said

Nick Korn, a local hospitality consultant and former bartender who has been documenting restaurant reopening plans from around the country at the [Reopen Right website](#).

Restaurant owners are still waiting on the Baker administration to release industry guidelines. But some say they can learn from what other industries were doing even before the pandemic.

“We have an investor who used to own a lot of Planet Fitnesses. And they clean the machinery during their busiest times, which seems counter-intuitive, but people know stuff is clean,” said Jefferson Macklin, owner of several restaurants, including Bar Mezzana in the South End. “We want to make sure that people feel comfortable. We’re in hospitality, and a big part of that is seeing it physically displayed, even though it’s always been going on anyway.”

Not all cleaning can be so public. Take public transit, never exactly known for the sparkling interiors of its vehicles. While crews should be able to continue cleaning vending machines and handrails at MBTA stations, it may be more of a challenge to disinfect trains and buses while they’re in use. Putting more people onboard a vehicle would likely run contrary to transit agencies’ goals of keeping ridership low for social distancing.

Instead, trains and buses will continue to be disinfected overnight or during layover periods, as the T’s current protocols require. The T will also share videos of cleaning crews on social media as a form of proof, said MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo, adding that the agency’s latest budget calls for increasing spending on cleaning and protective supplies by \$750,000 a week. The T two months ago said it would install hand sanitizer dispensers at busy stations, but so far has been unable to obtain those supplies because of heavy demand — something that the cleaning industry worries could be an issue at many organizations.

Stacy Thompson, director of the transportation advocacy group Livable Streets Alliance, suggested another way to build confidence in a skeptical ridership: post a simple sheet of paper on buses and train cars, similar to those in public restrooms, telling when the car was last disinfected, and by whom.

“Just communicating that on the bus, in multiple languages, would do so much to help people understand how clean and safe the system is,” Thompson said.

For those doing the cleaning, safety, too, is paramount. Advocates for janitors and sanitation crews argue they are front-line workers in the fight against coronavirus and should be treated as such. Roxana Rivera, vice president of SEIU 32BJ in Boston, which represents about 20,000 janitors, security guards and other workers at office buildings and universities, said her union wants custodians to get all the protective equipment they need to do it safely.

Consumer confidence may be buoyed by other visible measures beyond just cleaning — such as having employees wear masks or making store aisles wider, said Connie Chesner, a consultant whose firm, Armored Research, works with companies to develop best practices.

“Retailers who get these trust cues right shift consumers from conscious awareness to subconscious ease, freeing up their minds to focus on browsing, purchase, and enjoyment of experience,” she said.



Steve Birch of BIOCLEAR prepared to enter an office building in Boston last week. David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

Developers and property managers are also considering strategies to make buildings welcoming in the COVID-19 era. One is to install and market more touchless services, from devices that allow people to enter buildings without touching an ID badge reader to parking garages garage doors that can be opened by an app on your phone so you don't have to pull a ticket.

“The idea of touchless, tech-driven convenience is probably going to get a lot of traction going forward,” said Russ DeMartino, who heads the Boston development team at Skanska USA, which is installing touchless, app-based technology in an office building it's finishing at 2 Drydock Ave. in the Seaport.

Residential builders are thinking along similar lines, rushing to reassure residents that their buildings are safe and common areas being kept clean. Mount Vernon Co., which owns about 1,600 apartments in and around Boston, is investing in an array of health and safety measures, said chairman Bruce Percelay, from UV light sanitizers you can walk through when you enter a building to anti-microbial doormats to clean your shoes before entering an apartment.

“The new amenity isn’t your gym or a rooftop pool,” he said. “It’s safety.”