

Who you gonna call? Dust busters!

It's spring again and many a homeowner's heart turns to housework. But before you roll up your sleeves, note there are teams of serious professionals who can do it for you. By **Ginetta Vedrickas**

Strong sunlight, however sporadic, often heralds the annual big clean, when dust and grime come to light. Traditionally spring is the busiest time of year for the housing market, and canny vendors everywhere are busy sprucing up their homes in anticipation of a quick sale.

For those who can't face tackling their own cleaning, many companies now offer professional cleaning services specialising in "one-off cleans" for rental and "For Sale" properties. But does a professional clean really help you sell? "First impressions are what count. If you walk in and it's

A team of six burly Australian men turn up for what turns out to be a day of heavy cleaning duties

gleaming then that can make a big difference," says Australian-born Jack Pead, who left teaching and started Absolutely Spotless seven years ago.

The company now employs 20 people as the demand for professional cleaning grows. Mr Pead explains how it works: "With some clients I'll lead them through and explain what we can do, but others know exactly what they want done."

General cleaning ranges from £80 for a studio apartment to £200 for a five-bedroom house – and the first step is always a detailed consultation with itemised costs for specific and more extensive services. Carpet cleaning costs £1 per square yard, upholstery £10 per seat and windows inside and out are around £40 for a three-bedroom property.

The company has a minimum charge of £40, but its most expensive "full spring-clean" of a seven-storey, double-fronted Victorian house cost one recent client £2,000. Most jobs fall within the £200-£300 bracket but, with an eye on my own fester-



The Absolutely Spotless team at work: 'They turn a place into something special'

ing pile, it seems that extreme disorder can end up costing an unprepared client substantially more.

"People normally tidy up before we come in, although we will do that if people don't mind things not being in their usual place. We tend not to get into putting things away as people are often funny about it," says Mr Pead, closing the door on a particularly messy room after agreeing an estimate of £380 for a general clean which includes carpets.

The transformation day dawns, and it becomes clear that this is to be no Mrs Mop-style tinkering as a team of six burly young Australian men arrive for a day of what turns out to be heavy cleaning duties. As the air sweetens to the smell of in-

dustrial cleaning fluids, and noise levels rise as hefty domestic machinery works its magic, Mr Pead reveals that celebrities often call upon his services too. Interior designer Kelly Hoppen is a regular and singer Sinead O'Connor recently underwent a spring clean – but beyond that discretion is assured, as no amount of persuasion gets Mr Pead to launder dirty linen in public.

He finds no correlation between property values and grime levels. "You can go into a property that people have spent millions of pounds on and it won't be all that clean, whereas a modest little flat might be spotless," he says diplomatically. "It's interesting because you get to see a lot of different types of places and

people's zany ideas on decorating – you sometimes think, how can they live like that?"

Perhaps inevitably, dirt levels tend to be higher in rented properties that see heavier traffic, and the growth of the rentals market is partially responsible for increased demand for professional cleaning companies. Landlords in stiff competition for tenants find a pristine property can give them the edge over their rivals. Maxine Peller, lettings manager for Oakleys, believes a professional clean is essential in today's rentals market. "People expect a property to be pristine when they move in and landlords expect it to be pristine when they move out." Oakleys' client base is mostly cor-

porate, says Ms Peller, who admits that people renting tend to treat properties rather differently from homeowners. "It's tempting to take advantage of not having to do housework." She has used Absolutely Spotless since the company began: "They get whole teams in. They turn up looking like they've just abandoned their surfboards on Bondi Beach, and they really turn a place into something special".

Cleaning companies may find themselves revisiting the same properties in between tenancies: "Estate agents are our main clients for end-of-tenancies. Often we go

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back to the same property every six months when a tenancy is finished. You wouldn't believe the state of some of them," says Mr Pead.

My own property probably goes some way to disproving the theory that homeowners have higher standards, as the team spends a full five hours erasing years of sloppy housework and accumulated grime. Finally the oven shines, the tiles sparkle and the wooden floors appear shades lighter.

I can see why this type of service appeals to would-be-sellers and, apparently, fastidious buyers who find standards in their new home lacking: "The vendor may have had the house cleaned, but we sometimes get called in by the buyers and asked to clean every surface as they don't want to live with 'someone else's germs'. You often find yourself cleaning a perfectly clean house," adds Mr Pead.

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