

# A Super approach to cleaning

Prior to acquiring Supercare more than five years ago, property investor and former paramedic turned managing director **Ian Kebbell** had no experience in the cleaning sector. But it's this outsider perspective that has helped the Wellington-based cleaning firm buck industry trends and become one of the market's quiet achievers.



A self-described "accidental" commercial cleaning business owner, Ian Kebbell has grown Supercare from a single-office operation with a dozen staff to more than 120 employees across NZ.

Prior to acquiring Supercare more than five and a half years ago, Kebbell held various management, marketing and customer service roles in newspapers, the fire service, aviation and property – all of which he says has served as an advantage in the cleaning industry.

"I knew nothing about the industry but my background is business and people," he explained. "But, it's been an advantage having had experience in different industries. We don't get trapped into the industry norms. We make decisions based on what we think is best practice, not what the industry norm might be."

From small family-owned cafes through to large international corporates, Supercare's customers range in size and industry. "As we've grown our client base has changed, but we try to never lose sight of our roots."

## Alliances and ethos

Supercare has recently secured a number of Australasian contracts through alliances with large Australian commercial cleaning companies – a strategy which is paying off for the company, with more growth expected through projects next year.

"Our customer base is from one extreme to another. A lot of growth has come from some national contracts awarded, as well as our alliances with some Australian companies whose ethos aligns with our own. We're working on some exciting stuff that will see our growth continue, and will also see us in new parts of the country."

Despite its growing customer base and footprint, Kebbell says the company remains

a family-orientated operation, with Kebbell's daughter involved in the service support side of the business.

"At the end of the day, we're a family business. We're able to provide services for large customers as well as other smaller, family-operated businesses."

Supercare has been somewhat of a quiet achiever since Kebbell took over five and a half years ago – a strategy he says has been part of its success.

"We've operated under the radar for a while but that's been purposeful to some extent. We're not worried about what others are doing. We're only focused on what we want to do. We make decisions based on what we think is the right decision for our business."

Along with Kebbell's outsider experience, Supercare staff also have professional backgrounds in wide-ranging industries, which Kebbell says "brings fresh eyes and knowledge" to the team.

"I don't tend to employ traditional cleaning industry type staff and managers. I like to bring in people from other industries, but other industries that align with cleaning and face the same challenges," he said.

"We really treat our people with respect. I know everyone says that, but I like to think that we treat our staff fairly. My door is always open as the business owner and we're not a 'layer on layer' company. I'd like to maintain that ethos and anyone we take on board we make sure they have those same values."

"We usually find that out pretty early in an interview if they do, and we're not interested in people who don't value our people. As much as it's a cliché to say, it starts from the

top. The business owner sets the culture and the environment, and the decisions they make reflect that, and the decisions made by the managers on a day to day basis has to reflect that too."

## Price pressures

Kebbell says one of the major challenges in the industry continues to be the battle of price. "[Cleaning] is a very traditional industry and I think it could do with stepping back from itself – looking in from the outside – and changing."

"This industry has an unglamorous tag and also has a reputation that isn't as good as it should be. It's a hugely important industry but we undervalue ourselves. Sometimes we're our own worst enemy because we undervalue and undersell our services and people because of the highly competitive environment we're in."

"We work so hard to win the contracts; and sometimes that comes at the cost of value. The minimum rates we charge as an industry reflects how we've positioned ourselves but I think there's a lot of room to change that whole perception. Hopefully that will come but as an industry we have to all move in the same direction, otherwise we'll end up in the same downward spiral."

Kebbell says breaking the price barrier not only falls on the cleaning industry but also associated sectors and clients.

"Decision makers need to step back and look at the hourly rate they are being charged in comparison to other industries. We are providing quite a remarkable service at quite a low rate and that needs to change. Other trades charge double,

sometimes three times as much – yet the expectation for cleaning is so much higher in terms of the service we deliver.

"Like most business, we'd love to pay our staff the living wage but we can't do that unless the market accepts that change because that cost has to be passed on."

The other challenge according to Kebbell is what he believes to be an unrealistic expectation of the delivery of service.

"We're all human and sometimes there are days we don't perform as well as we'd like to or as expected. Everyone makes mistakes and yet cleaners tend to be chastised a lot more for an honest mistake."

"If we miss emptying a rubbish bin under a desk in a four-storey building, we know about it straight away – there's a high expectation on service for what is considered quite a low valued industry and that needs to change."

"I'm upfront with our customers. I won't promise to deliver 100 per cent service day in day out because they can't do that and I think there needs to be some tolerance and understanding."



## The year ahead

Among the initiatives in the pipeline for Supercare in 2018 is the release of a tailored, best-practice staff training manual, which is about to be rolled out.

"The demographic we employ are tactile learners. They learn best on the job. The training books and associated training program we're putting together at the moment will be tailored around their demographic and their lifestyle as well."

As well as expanding its footprint in Christchurch and the South Island, the company will look to expand its range of services, however, add-on services will be based on customer demand.

"When we first acquired the business we brought it back to basics and focused purely

on commercial cleaning. Once that was cemented we've been able to change and grow our services based on customer needs."

Supercare offers hygiene services in-house and has also recently started to build third-party relationships to deliver other services such as pest control, laundry and ground maintenance.

"We're seeing more of those types of service being asked by our customers," explained Kebbell. "It'll be interesting to see where that takes us because there's a gap that's starting to close between cleaning service providers and FM."

"How that gap evolves and what that means for the industry I'm not sure yet but it's a space to watch. But at the end of the day our core is still commercial cleaning. Anything we do is an add-on to that," he said.

"I keep saying we're going to have a year of consolidation but it never comes. Every time we say we're going to stop and take a breath we grow again. We've been incredibly busy so it will be nice to take a step back next year and appreciate what we've achieved as a team and we'll just see where it takes us."

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