

# PERSONAL JOURNAL.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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## HOME & FAMILY

### Help for Those Who Don't Do Windows

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bled to 33,937, putting it in the top 10% of all industry inquiries. Window cleaning generates about \$500 million annually in the U.S., according to the International Window Cleaning Association, an industry trade group.

So we turned our sights to a handful of national franchises that either require or strongly encourage units to carry hefty insurance and be bonded against theft, and to vet cleaners with criminal background checks. What's more, the franchises also set standards when it comes to how workers clean. While in most cases the services performed well beyond our expectations, in one instance we were left with a badly scratched window that made us glad the franchise was part of a national chain we could hold accountable.

Our testing took place in four particularly grimy-windowed houses in Arlington, Texas; Takoma Park, Md.; Atlanta; and Garrison, N.Y. In each location, we were able to land an appointment for interior and exterior cleaning within a week with one of four franchises: Window Gang, Squeegee Squad, Fish Window Cleaning and Dr. Glass Window Washing. We never got to test a fifth franchise, Window Genie, (www.windowgenie.com) which has 32 locations in 10 states, because the Pittsburgh shop didn't promptly return calls and our backup location, Chicago, got rained out.

To our surprise, we discovered many of these franchises do more than just clean windows—from pressure washing driveways to polishing chandeliers and cleaning gutters—though none pushed these extras too hard on us and not every franchise participates. We also learned that in most cases cleaners are paid on a commission basis, or “by the glass” as one worker described it to us, rather than an hourly wage to encourage them not to dawdle. They



A Fish Window Cleaning worker squeegees grime and tree residue off a window in our New York test home.

used a wide arsenal of tools—from Dawn detergent and steel wool to proprietary cleaners and scraping blades to remove bugs, paint, tree resin and gunk.

The best bet for our buck was Squeegee Squad, which nicely shined our 2,200-square-foot 1906 Atlanta bungalow and all its varied glass—including original wavy panes, stained glass and new insulated windows—for \$175 bucks. Then they knocked another 10% off that because we were first-time customers. We appreciated that our cleaner took off his shoes inside and stuck to his original quote after realizing we had more windows than anticipated. He used only dish soap, noting it wouldn't harm plants, and employed a scraper.

Likewise, it was hard to nitpick with the work done on our Texas and Maryland homes, which used Window Gang and Dr. Glass respectively. Dr. Glass adheres to a \$225 minimum but the franchise offered to drop that by \$100 for a simple exterior cleaning if we became a “regular” and got a second yearly servicing. We liked how carefully Dr. Glass's Eme Awa (who says he sings in a band when not washing windows) laid towels under his buckets indoors. Meanwhile, Mr. Awa's partners cleaned a

handful of doors not included in the original price.

In Arlington, Texas, while Window Gang's crew neglected to remove footwear inside, they made our home sparkle using a custom cleaning formula and Dawn detergent for dirtier windows. Removing our storm windows for cleaning was labor intensive and more than doubled our cleaning bill, so we opted to service fewer windows. Window Gang said the old storms were inefficient and offered to discard them for \$5 a pop. We declined but were pleased they took the time to seek our approval of their polishing work before putting the storms back on.

It was during our final cleaning in Garrison, N.Y., that we stumbled upon a potential pitfall of the trade: scratched windows. We were grateful Fish Window Cleaning ventured outside its territory to service our house (though charged us for the travel time) and were impressed by how quickly the two polite cleaners finished our 2,000-square-foot contemporary: 2.5 hours, the shortest clean-job in our test. But later in the afternoon when the sun shot into our kitchen, we noticed spidery scratches all over one small window and a few stray nicks on

other larger ones. The real downer: We'd just paid nearly \$3,000 to replace these units last fall with new high-efficiency insulated tempered glass.

When we told Fish franchise owner Mike Silverstein, he apologized and returned a few days later to examine the damage. He agreed on the spot to replace the small window and either buff out scratches on the others, or replace them too. He also said he would begin accompanying workers on residential jobs “for the foreseeable future” to ensure quality control.

Fish's corporate vice president of operations, Benjamin Mudd, says the scratches could possibly be traced to debris trapped on the glass during the tempering process that got knocked loose during scraping. He also directed us to an online Fish corporate training video that says using a new blade is “essential” to prevent scratching, and cautions workers never to scrape in a back-and-forth motion. Since this information was revealed post-cleaning, we had no way of knowing if our cleaners complied. Regardless, Mr. Mudd says Mr. Silverstein should have asked us to sign a glass-scratching waiver before using a scraper. (He didn't, but neither did any of the other franchises we tested who scraped.)

Mr. Mudd also assured us if the local Fish franchise had balked at paying for replacements, “then we would take care of it.” We'd already revealed our WSJ identity at this point, but both Mr. Mudd and Mr. Silverstein promised they'd follow the same procedure for any customer complaint of this nature. (Mr. Mudd later offered us a full refund of the \$460 we paid.)

So it looks like we'll be adding one more project to the fall list: install new windows.

—Douglas A. Blackmon, *Anne Marie Chaker and Susan Warren contributed to this article.*

## Don't Do Windows? You May Be in Luck

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS

WITH SUMMER'S distractions drawing to a close, we're reluctantly turning to home-improvement projects, and one thing is clear: We don't do windows. Or at least, we don't do them well or often enough.

That's evidenced by the layers of grime and suicidal moths caked on our glass from years of putting off cleaning until, well, next year. Rather than donate a precious weekend

to balancing on ladders with buckets, we opted instead to call for professional help. It's not hard to find; there are dozens of independent contractors advertising online and in the Yellow Pages of most towns.

**CRANKY CONSUMER**  
But we worried about credentials and liability issues if something went wrong. It seems we're not alone: From

2004 to 2007, the number of consumer inquiries to Better Business Bureaus about window-cleaning services has more than dou-  
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COMPANY/WEB SITE	TEST LOCATION/NO. FRANCHISES	SERVICE COST	EXTRAS OFFERED	COMMENT
Window Gang www.windowgang.com	Arlington, Texas; 190 franchises in 23 states	\$390 for 20 windows (10 regular plus storms); \$100 minimum charge	Pressure-washing; gutter, blind and shutter cleaning	Not much to fault except workers didn't remove shoes or wear booties inside. Windows were spotless and we appreciated that cleaners cheerfully climbed over a prickly hedge to get hard-to-reach glass. Total clean time: 5 hours.
Fish Window Cleaning Services www.fishwindowcleaning.com	Garrison, N.Y.; 170 franchises in 40 states	\$460 for 37 windows including several glass doors and large irregularly shaped windows; minimum charge \$85	Mirror, skylight, gutter and chandelier cleaning; some power-washing	Company traveled outside service area to reach us; workers were friendly. Unfortunately, we found one badly scratched window and several marks on others. And cleaners did not don booties or change shoes inside, which is company policy. Total clean time: 2.5 hours.
Dr. Glass Window Washing www.docglass.com	Takoma Park, Md.; 10 franchises in 3 states and Washington, D.C.	\$229 for 20 windows, screens and a door; minimum charge \$225	Gutter cleaning, power-washing, screen repair	Immaculate performance save one forgotten cobweb-coated screen. Cleaners removed shoes inside, and carefully avoided a cucumber vine we're training outside kitchen. Total clean time: 4 hours.
Squeegee Squad www.squeegeesquad.com	Atlanta; 5 franchises and two company-owned units in four states	\$175 for 27 clear windows, several glass doors and seven stained-glass windows; minimum charge \$50 to \$100	Gutter and chandelier cleaning; power-washing	Upon arrival, cleaner realized house had more windows than he'd quoted but stuck with stated price. He also threw in stained glass for free and gave a 10% first-time customer discount. Total clean time: 3.5 hours.

For more information visit:  
**SqueegeeSquad.com**

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