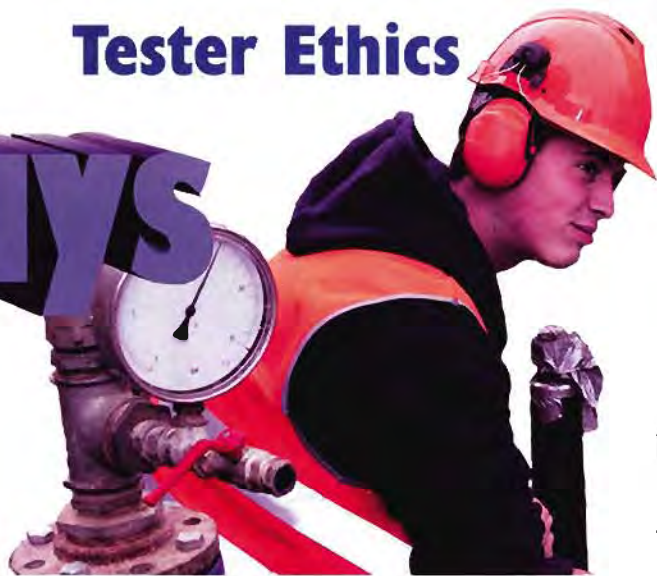


the Repair Guys

Tester Ethics



In our line of work, we field questions from contractors and technicians concerning repairs, installations, and general backflow prevention practices. We'd like to share some questions that we receive as well as our answers. Everyone has different opinions on these subjects and we would like to hear yours. Contact us with questions and ideas via email at: imark@backflowparts.com or mail us at American Backflow Products Co., PO Box 37025, Tallahassee, Florida 32315.

— Mark Inman and Jason Gregg

THE PROBLEM:

We all have heard stories about the private contractor that charged \$6000 for the installation of an assembly. We all know what is meant by “drive by test.” We all have heard the rumors about the tester that will falsify test reports. I am sure that you can come up with many more examples of unethical behavior that happens within the backflow industry. As a technician we should be able to identify unethical behavior, understand how it affects our industry, and have the ability to help correct it if possible. In the next three articles we will take a better look at this subject.

Mark:

The catch phrase these days seems to be “Tester Ethics”; I like to call it integrity. The definition of integrity according to Webster is “an uncompromising adherence to moral and ethical principles, soundness of moral character, honesty.”

This may sound strange, but I do not usually find people that enjoy being unethical. People by nature, want to do a good job and want to be respected for their work. The backflow testing industry is built around integrity and trust. The water purveyor must be able to trust the backflow technician to maintain the backflow assemblies properly. So, Mark, tell us something we do not already know?

The funny thing is, if you are reading this article, then I

am probably preaching to the choir. Like any other industry, there are always a few bad apples out there. Each one of us plays a part in the backflow industry, so it is up to us all to help ensure its integrity.

So, the question is why would a technician do something unethical? How do we ensure the integrity of the technicians and the industry as a whole? These questions will require all of us to take a good look at ourselves to see what we can do to improve the whole system. To answer those questions we need start by taking a look at how the backflow testing industry works and understanding the position of the water purveyor, technician, and the customer. This may give us some ideas on how to help control unethical behavior and maintain the integrity of the backflow testing industry.

Jason:

Testing backflow preventers is a unique profession. The water purveyor creates a regulation or code to deal with cross connections within their distribution system. This requires the installation and regular maintenance of backflow preventers at the service connection of the customer. Many water purveyors do not have the resources to fund the installation and maintenance of this equipment. So the responsibility of the installation and maintenance falls directly upon the customer. The customer is required to hire a private contractor to perform this service. The private contractor is then required to follow the rules and regulations set by the water purveyor. In this situation, the water purveyor is responsible for the enforcement of the codes that the private contractor must follow. This is a common way that many water utilities are able to implement a cross connection program without having to come up with large amounts of money to fund the project.

Now, of course there are many different variations of this relationship between the customer, the water purveyor, and the private contractor throughout the country. Some larger municipalities have the resources available to perform all the required services for the customer. The customer will pay for those services in a more indirect manner.

This three-way relationship between the water purveyor, contractor and customer is the key to the whole program working smoothly. It can also be a problem if all parties are not on the same page or working together under the same understanding. If they are not working together, then you open the door to unethical behavior. Now, we can take a look at the position of the customer, water purveyor, and contractor.

Mark:

Why not start with the most important part of the whole deal: The customer. Have you ever wondered why some customers are happy to pay \$75 for a tune up on their automobile, but go ballistic if they are charged \$40 to test their backflow assembly? Do customers ever make you feel like you are stealing their money when you inform them that they must install an assembly? Have you ever gotten a call back from a customer thanking you for helping to protect his/her drinking water? Why don't customers understand that we are trying to protect their drinking water and possibly save their lives? Why do you think that is? Simply put, the customer has little to no knowledge of backflow prevention.

Let's take a look at it from the customer's standpoint. First, he was informed by his water utility that he must have a backflow prevention assembly installed on his property to protect the water system. On top of that, he must have it tested every year to make sure it is working properly and if it fails, then he must have it repaired.

Many times this is a customer's first experience with

the backflow industry. So right from the start he has a bad taste in his mouth. No one has taken any time to educate him on any aspect of backflow prevention or cross connection control. The water purveyor should be the first line of defense when it comes to educating the customer about backflow prevention. Remember that a knowledgeable customer will be more likely to work with us instead of against us. This is the first step in creating and maintaining ethical behavior for all parties.

Jason:

The backflow industry is much like the insurance industry. The customer receives no benefit until after something bad happens. It is realistic to imagine your home burning down or being involved in an automobile accident because it happens to someone everyday. So you buy insurance for peace of mind. The average customer does not ever imagine that his water is going to be harmful. So why would he ever need to spend money to ensure that? If customers were educated and more knowledgeable about backflow prevention, they would demand and welcome these services. The customer can be our biggest ally to help fight unethical behavior. If the customer knows that backflow prevention helps to keep his family safe, he may demand that a contractor with integrity do the work.

By understanding the customer and working to educate him about backflow prevention, we can control unethical behavior and help maintain the integrity of the backflow industry. [dw&bp](#)

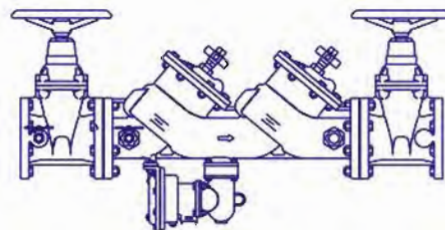


PARTS

(800) 575-9618

24 Hour Fax (850) 575-6508

Visit us at www.backflowparts.com



Backflow Preventer

- Repair Kits
- Accessories
- Enclosures

the Repair Guys

Tester Ethics: Part Two

The Water Purveyor and The Contractor

In our line of work, we field questions from contractors and technicians concerning repairs, installations, and general backflow prevention practices. We'd like to share some questions that we receive as well as our answers. Everyone has different opinions on these subjects and we would like to hear yours. Contact us with questions and ideas via email at: imark@backflowparts.com or mail us at American Backflow Products Co., PO Box 37025, Tallahassee, Florida 32315.

— Mark Inman and Jason Gregg

THE PROBLEM:

In last month's article we started discussing the subject of "tester ethics" and the integrity of the backflow industry. We talked about the backflow testing industry and the common perception that the customer has of our industry. This month we will take a look from the perspective of the water purveyor. We will also take a look at the relationship between the water purveyor and the contractor. It is important for everyone involved in the industry to take part in helping control any unethical behavior that is out there. The relationship between the water purveyor and contractor is the key to the whole program working smoothly. If they are not working together, then we open the door to unethical behavior.

Mark:

We get the opportunity to work with backflow professionals from both the public and private sectors on a daily basis. This gives us the chance to see the testing industry from both sides. Let's take a look at the water purveyor and his perspective. The Cross Connection Coordinator is the position that normally handles the backflow prevention program. This position will handle everything from the initial development of the program to plan reviews of new construction and the surveying of existing facilities. Responsibilities may also include administration, customer service, public education, inspections, record keeping, training and education of technicians, testing and repair, enforcement, and even development of a program manual. Many times we find that this position is

under-funded and lacks the proper amount of manpower to do the job properly. Implementing a cross connection control program does not produce revenue for the water purveyor, so in many cases there is a lack of support from within the utility. As you can imagine, this can make running an effective backflow program very difficult. Of course, the most important part of any cross connection program is the installation, maintenance, and testing of the equipment. This is the most costly part of the program as well. So, in many cases the purveyor will require the customer to assume this cost in a direct manner. This is when the private contractor enters the picture.

Jason:

There is no doubt that there are unethical private contractors in our industry. Fortunately, they are the exception to the rule. The majority of contractors are professional and strive to do the best job they can for the customer and the purveyor.

The degree to which the private contractor participates in the backflow prevention program can vary greatly for each water purveyor. The private contractor participates because of the opportunity to make a profit. I realize that many people think that



making a profit is an evil concept. But in a free market, it motivates people to get up in the morning to manufacture products and perform services within an economy. Private contractors in the backflow industry are generally made up of professionals from the plumbing, irrigation, mechanical, or fire sprinkler trades. Private contractors are responsible for their own education and the cost of their equipment, tools and insurance. Each one of these trades must follow some kind of state code or regulation that is designed specifically for that type of work. Most city or county agencies have inspectors on staff that strictly enforce the actual work of the contractor. When it comes to cross connection control, the initial installation of a backflow preventer will be inspected thoroughly, but the annu-

al testing or repairs are not controlled as closely.

Generally the water purveyor will require the private contractor to meet certain criteria or prove his competence to test and repair backflow preventers within a jurisdiction. Once this requirement is satisfied the contractor is then able to do the testing for the purveyor and charge the customer for the work.

Mark:

So lets take a look at the relationship between the contractor and the water purveyor. The water purveyor is ultimately responsible for the protection of the water system. That also means that they are in part responsible for anyone that does work on the system. The private contractor essentially acts as a subcontractor for the water purveyor, but they work directly for the customer at the same time. The contractor basically has two bosses. Anyone who has ever had to answer to two bosses knows it can be very difficult and can put a strain on their working relationship. Many times this is the case when it comes to the contractor and the purveyor. The purveyor will tell you that his main problem is dealing with the contractor and his seemingly disregard for regulations and professional behavior. For instance, test reports not being filled out completely, test reports not turned in on a timely basis, drive by testing, falsified test reports, etc.

On the other hand, the contractor will tell you his main problem is that he gets no support from the purveyor. For instance, retest letters not being sent out, no consistent survey programs, no recourse for a customer who does not pay, or no discipline for unethical behavior of fellow testers.

There is a definite divide between both sides. The purveyor can't trust the contractor, and the contractor feels like the purveyor is not doing their job.

Jason:

What makes life even harder is when the customer calls the purveyor complaining that the contractor they hired did not do his job correctly. Now the purveyor feels that he must get involved between the contractor and the customer. It can become a soap opera. It also helps to create a rift between all parties. Once they start to lose trust in one another, the integrity of the backflow industry begins to break down. When we start to lose the integrity, we open the door even wider for unethical behavior.

Many times a lack of communication or a simple misunderstanding may be the only problem.

For cross connection control programs like this to survive and work well, the relationship between the contractor and purveyor must be strong and united. Sometimes both sides are so busy blaming each other that they lose perspective over the situation and what is at stake. If a customer feels that there is no unity behind a program that he does not understand in the first place, he will be more likely to fight you or not comply. If this customer gets mad enough and has plenty of time to spend, he may start calling his mayor, county commissioner and any other legislator he can, to complain about backflow prevention.

How many legislators do you know that understand backflow prevention? How many of them will back you up, or will they side with the voter?

If we can find ways to strengthen the relationship between the private contractor and the water purveyor, we can better control unethical behavior and preserve the integrity of the backflow industry.

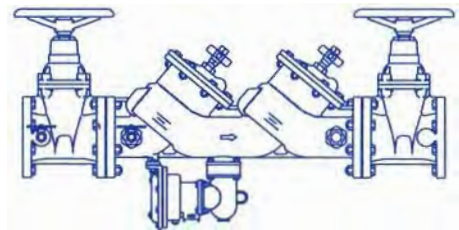


PARTS

(800) 575-9618

24 Hour Fax (850) 575-6508

Visit us at www.backflowparts.com



Backflow Preventer

- Repair Kits
- Accessories
- Enclosures

the Repair GUYS

Tester Ethics: Part Three

Enforcement, Communication and Education

In our line of work, we field questions from contractors and technicians concerning repairs, installations, and general backflow prevention practices. We'd like to share some questions that we receive as well as our answers. Everyone has different opinions on these subjects and we would like to hear yours. Contact us with questions and ideas via email at: imark@backflowparts.com or mail us at American Backflow Products Co., PO Box 37025, Tallahassee, Florida 32315.

— Mark Inman and Jason Gregg

THE ISSUE:

In the last two articles we examined the backflow industry and how it works. We looked at the industry from the customers' viewpoint. We also discussed the typical working relationship between the water purveyor and the private contractor. This gives us a better perspective of our industry and a better understanding of problems that can exist. Problems like these can hurt a backflow program and open the door for unethical behavior. In this article we will discuss some ideas to help us control unethical behavior by improving the working relationship between the purveyor and contractor. We will also look at some ways to help improve the customers' perception of the backflow industry.

Mark:

One of the original questions in this series was "Why would a technician do something unethical?" There is only one answer: Because he thinks he can get away with it. How do you fight that? Enforcement. Do you exceed the speed limit when a state trooper is present? Of course not, you have a fear of getting a traffic citation for breaking the law. But, how many times have you broken the speed limit because you thought no one would know? We are dealing with human nature.

As with any industry, you will always have a few "bad apples." You just don't want them to spoil the whole bunch. We have law enforcement officers to help control people when they break the law or act unethically. In the backflow industry, we must have someone that enforces the codes or regulations as well. If an unethical contractor feels like there is no enforcement or penalty for bending the rules, he may try shortcutting

them at some point. Enforcement of the rules is normally the responsibility of the water purveyor. Many times the water purveyor may focus the majority of his energy on customer compliance and less on tester compliance. When this happens, we open the door to unethical behavior.

Lets face it, not everyone has the time to investigate a tester. It is not always fun to confront or reprimand someone that is caught breaking the rules, but this is a very important part of preventing unethical behavior. Having a strong enforcement policy may include specific guidelines and penalties for testers that are caught breaking the rules. Just because you have an enforcement policy, it does not mean the unethical behavior will stop, but it will definitely get the attention of the contractor.

Jason:

Let's take a look at some great ideas of enforcement from around the country.

There is a water district in South Florida that will require new certified testers to successfully perform a hands-on examination for the cross connection coordinator before that tester can be added to the "list of approved testers." Now, this may not seem like it has any effect, but it lets that tester know, right off the bat, that they mean business in that district.

A water utility in North Carolina uses an "Ethics Agreement" that a tester must sign in order to be registered on the city list. This code of ethics goes over things like how to fill out a test report, acceptable test procedures, and proper customer service.

A cross connection coordinator from the Midwest has a "Three Strikes Policy." For every 20 or so test reports the coordinator receives, he will physically go out to the site and test the assembly and compare results. If he finds anything out of the ordinary, he will document his test results and take pictures. He then requires the tester to come to his office to discuss the problem. If there is no good explanation, the tester is then written up in much the same way a utility employee would be for disciplinary actions. If the tester is written up three times, then he is no longer able to test in that area. Complaints from customers and fellow testers are investigated the same way.

The way enforcement is handled can vary greatly, but the important thing is to let the contractor know that his work will be monitored.

Mark:

So this leads us to the next problem. How do we improve the working relationship between the purveyor and the contractor? Communication. It is probably the most underrated problem solver known to man. Communication will allow the purveyor to explain exactly what he expects of the contractor and it will allow the contractor to ask questions and voice his concerns. It may allow them to bring up new ideas or solutions. For instance, the water purveyor that is short on manpower can really benefit from the contractor that will report things that he sees out in the field. The contractor can really benefit from the purveyor that will help out with a customer that refuses to pay. If they work together, the backflow program can become much more effective. Notice we did not say they would always agree or even like each other, but at least this type of interaction helps to build trust and creates a united front in the war on backflow.

One of the best ways to communicate with the technicians in a given jurisdiction would be to hold a mandatory meeting once a year or maybe more for all certified testers. This meeting could be used to lay out the expectations the purveyor has for installations or repairs. It can be used to announce any changes that may occur for that next year. It could be used to explain or go over the ordinance or code so that the technician has a clear understanding of the backflow program. It could also be a forum for the contractor to network with fellow contractors. The bottom line is, that if the contractor feels like the program is strong and he is an important part of that program, then he will take pride and work hard to do a good job. This creates integrity and helps close the door on unethical behavior.

Jason:

Now we can look at some ways to help improve the customers' perception of the backflow industry. You might wonder

why we even care what the customer thinks. I mean, backflow prevention is a rule, right? The customer will just have to learn to accept it. Right?

Whether you are a water purveyor or a contractor, I am sure you will agree that if the customer is working with you, everyone's job becomes much easier. More importantly, it helps to build public trust for the backflow industry.

So how do we achieve this? Education. Both the water purveyor and technician can help educate the customer.

Some water purveyors will add a small pamphlet to the monthly utility bill that will answer some commonly asked questions about backflow prevention. A pamphlet can also be used as a door hanger. Public workshops are always a good way to get the word out. A paragraph about backflow prevention in the Annual Water Quality Report has been used as well. Public service announcements on the radio or TV can be a little pricey, but it never hurts to try.

The backflow technician, many times, is the only representative of the backflow industry that the customer will ever see.

The backflow technician needs to have a clear objective of the backflow program so he can answer customer questions while he is in the field. The technician should be able to take the time to explain testing procedures and repairs to the customer. The technician can also help educate the customer on things like freeze protection and basic preventative maintenance for his backflow preventer. When it comes to the backflow industry, the customer can be taken for granted. If we take some simple steps to help him understand what we do, he will be more likely to have a good perception of backflow prevention and be more willing to work with us.

When we talk about unethical behavior, you must understand it is more than just a greedy private contractor. If each of us does our part to make the industry stronger, then we help close door on unethical behavior and we insure the integrity of backflow industry as a whole.

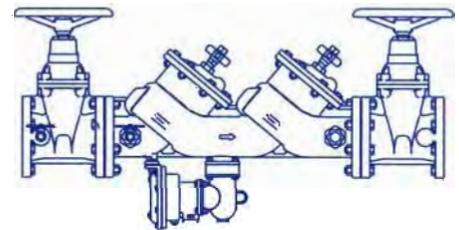


PARTS

(800) 575-9618

24 Hour Fax (850) 575-6508

Visit us at www.backflowparts.com



Backflow Preventer

- Repair Kits
- Accessories
- Enclosures