The Dabbler Problem™: A Field Report

The four types of providers that serve multifamily communities on the side, and the warning signs property managers can observe on their own property.

Overview

In multifamily communities, pet waste management is often handled by a company whose core business is something else. The service gets added to a janitorial contract, a landscaping agreement, a residential route, or an equipment order. We call this the dabbler problem.

None of these are bad businesses. But none of them are built for this work, and the gap shows up in a consistent pattern: the same stations missed visit after visit, service frequencies that don't match what the property needs, and billing that continues whether or not the problem gets solved. Many managers have already experienced it and assumed it was simply how pet waste service works.

DEFINITION **Dabbler** — a provider that offers pet waste management as a side service, without the systems, training, or station-level accountability that multifamily communities require.

The four types of dabblers

Each type arrives at pet waste management from a different direction. Each leaves its own observable traces.

01 Janitorial and property maintenance companies

These companies already service the property: common areas, clubhouses, fitness centers. Pet waste removal gets added to the contract because it's convenient. But janitorial teams aren't trained for route-based pet waste management, don't understand station siting, and don't have systems built for accountability at the station level.

WARNING SIGNS

- Pet waste is one line in a broader maintenance contract, not its own scope of work.
- No record of which stations were serviced on a given visit.
- Stations sit where they were easy to install, not where residents walk their pets.

02 Lawn care and landscaping companies

Lawn crews are on the property anyway. Pet waste removal becomes a line item, something tacked on to justify a higher contract value. But landscape teams work on a seasonal rhythm that doesn't match the year-round consistency pet waste management requires. And the skill set is completely different.

WARNING SIGNS

- Service quality rises and falls with the mowing season.
- Pet waste pickup was presented as an add-on to the landscaping agreement.
- No one has explained why a particular service frequency was recommended.

03 Residential pet waste removal companies

These companies know pet waste, but they know residential pet waste. Backyard service for single-family homes is not the same as managing 40+ stations across a large multifamily community. Commercial service requires different systems, different reporting, and a different relationship with the client. Residential companies that dabble in commercial often bring a residential mindset to a commercial contract.

WARNING SIGNS

- The crew that services your community also runs residential routes.
- The same station is missed on consecutive visits.
- Frequency increases are recommended, but the stations stay dirty.
- You receive an invoice after each visit, but no proof of service.

04 Product manufacturers without service experience

Some companies sell the equipment (stations, bags, signage) and offer service as an add-on. But building a product and servicing a community are different disciplines. Without field service operations at their core, these companies lack the muscle memory, management systems, and culture to deliver consistent service over the life of a contract.

WARNING SIGNS

- Service was offered as part of an equipment purchase.
- Flat dispenser roofs let rain soak the bag rolls.
- Straight bolts inside the can catch and tear liners.
- No drain holes, so water pools and rots the base.

FROM THE FIELD

What we found at one community

Not long ago, we took over service at a large multifamily community from a company that split its time between residential and commercial customers. The residential work was their core. Commercial pet waste was a line item on the invoice, not a commitment in their culture.

The evidence was easy to find. The same trash cans had been skipped, visit after visit. The community had been talked into twice-weekly service at certain stations, a cost it absorbed every month for a problem that never got solved.

The bag supply told the same story. The community paid per card of bags stocked in the dispensers. At one station, bags from a single restocking lasted five visits, because the dispenser had been packed so full it didn't need to be touched for weeks. The provider had stopped paying attention to individual stations and started minimizing its own effort while the billing kept running.

WE ASSESSED
Every station walked and reviewed individually.

WE STANDARDIZED
Every station moved to weekly service. No exceptions, no upsells.

SIX MONTHS LATER
Not one station has required a service increase.

The community is cleaner, the cost is lower, and the manager has one less thing to worry about.

What the four types have in common

The root cause is the same in every case: there is no system built for station-level accountability. Without one, missed stations go unnoticed, frequencies drift, and the manager learns about problems from residents instead of from the provider.

A provider built for multifamily work can show you, in writing, how service is delivered and verified. At minimum, that means:

- **A written service protocol** that defines what is inspected, restocked, and documented at every station on every visit.
- **Timestamped proof of service** with photo verification, delivered after each visit.
- **Station-by-station accountability**, not route-level averages.
- **Service frequency set correctly from the start**, with a documented reason for each station.
- **Proactive issue reporting**, so problems are flagged before you have to call.

BEFORE YOUR NEXT SERVICE VISIT

Five questions to ask your current provider

1. Do you know exactly which stations were serviced during your last visit, with a timestamp to prove it?
2. Has your provider explained why a specific service frequency was recommended for each station?
3. Have you seen the same station missed on consecutive visits?
4. Does your provider operate with a written service protocol?
5. When did your provider last flag a problem before you had to call about it?

If the answers are unclear, the full set of questions is in **The Dabbler Checklist™**, a one-page companion to this report. Available at foresightusa.com.

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