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Keeping Up On Carpets

By Steve Hanig and Steve Williams — posted 08/01/2007

To develop an effective carpet maintenance program, cleaning professionals need a good understanding of what types of carpets are on the market, how they are made and used, the best way to maintain them, and—especially given today’s focus on health—what positive effects they might have on indoor air quality (IAQ). Savvy distributors will want to help educate their customers regarding these distinctions so that together they can develop a program using the products and techniques that best fit the customer’s particular carpet care needs.

Types & Tips

The core ingredient in carpets is the fiber. Types of fibers most often used include:

- Acrylic—A synthetic fiber with the look and feel of wool
- Wool—More costly than synthetics, with a “plush” look and feel
- Polyester—Easier to clean than wool while having a similar look and feel
- Olefin—A synthetic fiber, considered easy to clean and often used in indoor/outdoor settings
- Nylon—The most widely used carpet fiber in the United States, considered very wear-resistant and generally good for those high-traffic areas.

Carpet & IAQ

Although many of the IAQ questions and concerns about carpeting have subsided, some people persist in associating carpeting with poor IAQ. This misinformation has resulted in some rather drastic changes over the years.

For instance, Sweden banned the use of carpeting in public schools in the late 1980s; 10 years later, Florida and Vermont were informed that their carpets were contributing to respiratory problems in children so the carpeting was removed in some of those states’ schools.

Today, most experts agree that carpeting does not cause IAQ problems. In a 2001 study, Cornell University researchers determined that “as long as facilities use vacuum cleaners with high-efficiency filtration and keep the carpets clean, carpets can be healthy, safe, and economical floor coverings in most any facility.”

Perhaps more importantly, additional studies have shown that carpeting can actually help improve IAQ: Unlike other types of flooring, carpet fibers can trap particulates and prevent them from becoming airborne, which is all the more reason why Carpet is Good, a coalition of carpet manufacturers, wants everyone to know that if properly maintained, carpeting is a healthy, viable flooring choice.

“Building managers must take responsibility for the maintenance of their facilities and quit blaming IAQ problems on carpeting,” says Alison Woolford, with DuPont Antron, a carpet manufacturer and Carpet is Good member. “Proper [carpet] maintenance will keep allergens out of the breathing zone.”

The Right Stuff

Since carpeting’s influence on IAQ comes down to proper maintenance, facility service providers should know that certain carpet care products, equipment, and practices can help keep carpets clean and healthy and help improve IAQ.

Wear. Traffic patterns have a definite effect on carpets. Heavily trafficked areas, such as entries, hallways, and around elevators, require daily, multiple-pass vacuuming. Because most carpet soil is dry, it needs to be removed regularly by vacuuming or it can become embedded in the fibers, causing carpet damage.

Spot removal. Carpet spotting is often performed during business hours. Traditional spot-cleaning chemicals can adversely affect building occupants. Instead, use water-based compounds that are combed into the fibers and later vacuumed. This is less harmful to IAQ.

Also, cleaning up spills as they occur minimizes the amount of work needed later. Blotting with an absorbent towel will usually remove water-based spills. For oil-based spots, apply a nonwater-based, dry-cleaning solvent to a towel and clean the area. Avoid putting the cleaner directly on the carpet because that may cause the spot to spread and use these more toxic solvents only when necessary and with adequate ventilation.

Vacuuming. True High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) vacuum cleaners (with airtight casings) remove particulates embedded in carpet fibers, preventing the particulates from becoming airborne. If a HEPA vacuum cleaner is not available, high-efficiency microfiltration vacuum bags will also trap very small particulates, preventing them from becoming airborne.

Carpet extraction. A major part of carpet maintenance, carpet extraction may be performed as often as once a week or as seldom as once a year, depending on traffic, use, and soiling. The extraction process deep-cleans and removes soluble soil and oil-based spills that regular vacuuming cannot.

Pre-spray with a cleaning solution and allow 10 to 15 minutes of dwelling time before extracting.

Low-moisture extractors release less water into the carpet for faster drying times. Use machines that heat solution to more than 200 F to activate the chemicals and improve cleaning and release as little as .8 gallons per minute at 300 to 500 psi. Additionally, machines that maintain close proximity to the carpet with powerful water lift help assure fast and effective water recovery, important since carpets taking longer than 12 hours to dry run the risk of developing mold and mildew problems.

Air movers. Often overlooked in a carpet maintenance program are air movers. High-powered air movers are specially designed to speed drying time after extraction. Some air movers are designed to be used in several different positions—upright, tilted forward or backward, face down, face up, stacked, etc. The more versatile the machine, the better it can handle a variety of carpet cleaning situations.

Carpet care is a major component of most facilities' cleaning and maintenance budgets. Assisting your customers in developing a viable program that keeps their carpets cleaner and their IAQ healthier is good for them and good for your customer-supplier relationship.

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