

An Add-On Service for Carpet Cleaners

Stephen J. Romero

A mother with four very active teenage boys takes her minivan back to the dealer. There is nothing mechanically wrong with the car and, except for a few dings and dents, the exterior looks pretty good as well. The problem is the interior. After



“chauffeuring” her four sons and their friends to hockey games, baseball games, and weekend excursions, the interior of the van, specifically the carpet and seat upholstery, has taken a real beating.

She asks her dealer if she can purchase seat covers for the seats and if some type of plastic or rubber covering is available to place over the carpet. She even asks, because

the carpet has become so soiled, if it can be removed altogether.

Unfortunately, the dealer says that the “ready made” seat covers available will not fit and that the manufacturer does not make seat covers specifically for the van. Further, there is no covering for the carpet, and to remove it would expose wiring and other mechanicals placed under the carpet. His suggestion: call a professional carpet cleaner and have them clean the carpet and upholstery.

A New Opportunity in Tough Times?

Fortunately, the professional cleaning industry tends to be less affected by downturns in the economy than other industries, such as real estate, travel, or auto sales. However, many homeowners, the bulk of many carpet cleaners’ customers, are justifiably concerned about their economic futures right now and may choose to postpone cleaning their carpets as long as possible.

According to Jim Harris Sr., founder and president of Janitornics, a major contract cleaning company in upstate New York, businesses have to adjust to changing times if

they are to succeed. Often, tough times open doors for new opportunities.

Could the downturn in the economy mean that carpet cleaning professionals should look into auto carpet cleaning as an add-on service? For many carpet cleaners, the answer is yes--and yes for a variety of reasons:

- The service is easy to get into. Most carpet cleaning professionals already have hot-water extractors, the key equipment necessary to clean auto carpets and upholstery. They may need to purchase new wands or hand tools, but these tend to be relatively inexpensive. However, an [ozone generator](#) should also be purchased, since it is so effective at eliminating odors.



- Demand is set to grow. In better times, people traded their cars for a new automobile about every three or four years. However, many economists are now suggesting this is far too frequent and that cars should

be traded every five to seven years. This means interior maintenance of carpets and upholstery will likely become a growing concern.

- Contract work in this area is increasing. A major, nationwide auto dealership recently announced they are laying off more than 600 of their workers because of the economy. Many of these workers detailed and restored the interior of cars, readying the vehicles for resale. Instead of hiring full-time employees to perform this task, dealerships are finding it less expensive to outsource the work on an as-needed basis.
- Rental companies need carpet cleaners. Even though many rental-car agencies ban smoking in their rented vehicles, it is estimated that about 20 percent of the renters ignore the ban. In most cases, rental maintenance crews use “masking agents” to temporarily hide the smoke odor. However, to truly eradicate the odor typically requires the use of professional carpet cleaning and ozone equipment, normally performed by professional carpet cleaners. In addition, although many rental agencies prefer a “dry”

carpet cleaning system so that the car can be ready for rental quickly eventually the carpets will need a more extensive carpet cleaning.

- Those who lease vehicles form a growing customer base for carpet cleaners. Companies that lease cars used to be lenient about exterior scratches and excessive soiling of their cars. But now they're charging lessees if the car is returned in poor condition. One auto detailer says that 25 percent of his business now comes from people who are about to return their leased vehicles and the interior of the car, especially the carpets, is often the most difficult area to clean. In those situations, he calls in a professional carpet cleaner to help with the problem.

What You Need to Know

In most cases, cleaning the carpets and upholstery in automobiles is very similar to cleaning carpets and upholstery in homes and offices. Typically, prespraying soiled areas, allowing for proper agitation and adequate dwell time per the chemical manufacturer's recommendations, and using a [hot-water extractor \(water](#)

[heated to 212 degrees \(F\)](#) to improve the effectiveness of the cleaning chemicals with 100 psi is all that is needed.

The chemicals used to clean auto carpets and upholstery are often the same as those used in other types of carpet cleaning. However, a detergent-free chemical is preferable because it is less damaging to the extractor.

Additionally, a rinsing element often is used to ensure that no chemical residue is left behind, which could be harmful to auto occupants or create more soiling.

Additionally, residue left in the extractor can be harmful to the machine.



Carpet cleaners new to interior cleaning are often unsure of how and what to charge for this service. And indeed, the rates can vary based on the size of the car, the amount of soiling, whether odors must be eradicated, and the location. Also, if working for auto dealers or rental agencies, they may want a flat-fee contracted amount to apply to all cars, no

matter how soiled or what cleaning task needs to be performed.

Generally, a charge of \$100 per cleaning is typical. If ozone equipment is necessary, an additional \$1 per minute may be charged. Normally, the machine must be used for about 20 to 30 minutes to remove all interior car odors, allowing for \$20 to \$30 to be added to the initial charge.

Is It for You?

Performing the work is actually the easy part. And fortunately, expanding into the automotive detail world does not involve a significant amount of capital.

But for many carpet cleaning professionals, the more difficult part is getting the customers, simply because the marketing process is different. Instead of advertising, which certainly can help, this add-on service often requires calling on auto rental agencies, leasing companies, and new and used car dealers to solicit their business. Some carpet cleaners find this type of marketing exciting, while others dread it.

Often the best way to overcome the dread is to simply start making the calls and marketing the service. Keep in mind the bigger picture. This is an opportunity to expand your business that can prove to be quite lucrative, in both difficult as well as good economic times.

Stephen J. Romero has been in the carpet cleaning and restoration business since 1993. From 2000 - 2007 he ran two mid-size carpet cleaning and restoration companies based in North Idaho. He has extensive training in cleaning, remediation, water and fire damage restoration.