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Carpet Care: A Fly on the Wall

By Dawn Shoemaker — posted 03/23/2010



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At a recent trade show catering to the professional carpet-cleaning

industry, I had the opportunity to not only listen to what exhibitors and their salespeople had to say about their extractors and other equipment, but also to find out what the attendees—mostly carpet-cleaning technicians—were asking about the equipment. The booths where I spent most of my time were occupied by two leading manufacturers of carpet-cleaning equipment—one, primarily a truck-mount manufacturer, the other, a maker of portable carpet-cleaning equipment.

In many ways, it was like being a fly on the wall. Paying close attention, I was soon able to distinguish between the newbies and the seasoned technicians. I found it to be a real eye-opener listening to attendees' concerns, questions, and problems.

Some issues were brought up over and over again. For instance, the one word I heard most was "reliable." A number of technicians mentioned how they would experience a problem with a machine—portable or truck mount—invariably on a job or right before a job. Concerns about equipment reliability led to the most frequently asked question at the booth: How service-friendly is the extractor?

The portable carpet-extractor exhibitor, Charlie Marinella of U.S. Products—a leading manufacturer of professional carpet, floor, restoration, and auto-care products—answered the question by "picking up the hood" of the extractor so attendees could view the pump, the vac motors, and other internal components. Should there be a problem, easy access to these components makes the extractors service-friendly for the user and easier to repair overall, minimizing downtime and costs. "[It's] a money maker as well," remarked one technician. "Without the machine [working], you can't work, and that means no money. It's as simple as that."

Examining the components of a truckmount system was a more complicated process for the technicians. Reliability, however, was still a key concern. "This is why many carpet-cleaning technicians have opted for vehicle-powered or clutch-drive [truck-mount] systems," says Wayne Boone, vice president of sales for HydraMaster, manufacturer of truck-mount carpet-cleaning equipment. "They typically require a lot less maintenance, so they are more reliable."

Weight, Buckets, Floats & Spray Jets

Both newbies and seasoned carpet cleaners expressed concerns about the weight and maneuverability of some portable extractors. This is, of course, a big concern because water weighs approximately eight pounds per gallon. "If the portable has a 16-gallon-tank capacity, this means the weight of the water alone is 128 pounds," says Marinella. "Many operators will have trouble maneuvering a machine that heavy, especially if it has to go up and down stairs."

Another issue was the filling and emptying of tanks. The seasoned

carpet cleaners were already well aware of the problems caused by having to lift multiple buckets of water to fill tanks. Portables with low-to-the-ground solution-fill tanks can rectify this problem, “and when we point this out to the technician, it invariably gets an approving eye,” says Marinella. “Also, some portables now have auto-fill/auto-dump systems, so this problem has been eliminated entirely.”

A foam-sensitive shutoff mechanism—also known as a float, ball-float vacuum shutoff, or emergency-shutoff system—was another concern for many visitors to the portable extractor’s booth. Apparently, several technicians had experienced damage, including vac-motor burnout, as a result of moisture getting into the motor.

Also frequently discussed were equipment wands. Booth visitors were looking for lightweight wands with the ability to glide over carpets, making carpet cleaning easier.

“Cleaning the spray jets on the wands is an issue that comes up frequently,” says Boone. “The wands have very small openings, so they can become clogged with soil or cleaning-chemical residue relatively quickly. The techs want to be able to access and rinse the jets to keep them functioning at tip-top performance.”

Heat & Hard Floors

Choosing between heated and nonheated carpet extractors was another common topic at the show. Many seasoned technicians using portable machines said that they currently have extractors that do not heat the water/solution and questioned why they should consider a heated machine.

“Many times, the only way to answer this question is to ask them what their [carpet] cleaning needs are,” says Marinella. “If they are cleaning only carpets in moderately soiled locations or carpets made of natural fibers, such as wool, heat may not be the best choice or that important. But if they clean carpets made of synthetic fibers, such as nylon—the most common carpet fiber—heavily soiled carpets, or carpets installed in heavy-traffic areas, the heat will help dissolve soils and get much better results.”

“We are also getting more and more questions asking if the equipment is designed to clean hard-surface floors,” adds Marinella. “This was not a question we heard [much] maybe 10 years ago. But now, many carpet cleaners want to be able to service both hard and carpeted floor coverings.”

Green Not Seen

Finally, although green carpet cleaning is getting considerable attention these days in the various trade publications—and despite the fact that there are some carpet cleaning technicians who now offer it and some

who have transferred completely to it—it was not an issue that came up much at the show.

After a while, I finally started asking some of the technicians if they knew what green carpet cleaning involved or if they provided green carpet-cleaning services for their customers. Almost always, the response was, “We never get asked about it.”

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