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## **A STRAIGHTFORWARD APPROACH TO UPHOLSTERY CLEANING**

"You can't tell how deep a puddle is until you step in it." This expression carries a lot of weight when talking about upholstery cleaning. Many a professional carpet cleaner or building service contractor was introduced into cleaning upholstery simply by the demand of the customer or boss. Homeowners expect a carpet cleaner to be able to clean upholstery. Business owners expect that someone that can clean carpet can also clean upholstery.

The only problem we usually encounter in taking on this task is a lack of preparation or understanding as to what is required of us. Too often because we clean carpet, we assume upholstery is about as simple. A fatal mistake! What seems to be simple to clean may turn on us either during or after cleaning and that can have disastrous results. We become discouraged because upholstery cleaning is more technical than carpet cleaning and it requires preinspection, knowing fabrics, chemicals, etc. Upholstery is more delicate than carpet. We have to pay special attention to not get too aggressive. Grooming after cleaning is essential. Different textures can provide us with problems. But probably the most frustrating thing about upholstery cleaning is that in some cases, we can do everything right and still get into trouble. Haitian cottons, fabrics that latently bleed, and fabrics that shrink can absolutely turn on us. Yet, we all see cleaners advertising to clean couches and chairs for \$29.95. They make it sound so easy.

Very often, the most frightening part about upholstery is that we are not quite sure what the stuff is made of. A quality course on upholstery cleaning is of extreme value and may help alleviate most of this fear. Even if you had a good idea of the fabric content, you still have to take into consideration some of the other requirements. The most crucial first step in the success of upholstery cleaning is to pre-inspect the upholstery before you proceed to anything else. Pre-inspection determines how to price it in relation to how much time is involved in cleaning. The time involvement is based on the fabric, the type and amount of soil, and the method you need to employ in order to clean it. Pre-inspection will also slow you down for a few minutes to make you think rather than just whipping out a tool and "soaking the thing down." The most common mistakes in upholstery cleaning that can lead to major catastrophes are: 1) not pre-inspecting: and 2) overwetting. The way that you can avoid messing up on a job is through the application of wisdom and the communication of education during the pre-inspection process. A wise person once said "wisdom is the uncommon ability to use common sense." Nothing could ring truer in upholstery cleaning. Know your fabrics and what causes problems. Become familiar with proven methods. If possible, gain experience through practice on your own upholstery. But remember, Most importantly of all - PRE-TEST!!!

Another important step in the pre-inspection process is to be able to identify latent and pre-existing problems that you did not cause. Look for improperly treated fabrics, deterioration of fabric by age or sun, markings on the upholstery from the backing or structure of the piece, urine damage, pre-existing browning, and loss of finish - crush, polish, pile.

Equipment selection is also very important. A cleaning machine and the tools attached to it may very well work against you if you did not select them carefully and in conjunction with what you are cleaning. Look at the equipment you are using. Determine if you do enough upholstery cleaning, would you be better off investing in the equipment exclusively designed for upholstery cleaning instead of tying up your truck-mount or other extraction equipment? Could the machine that you are using cause problems such as over-wetting or streaking? Overwetting is basically the responsibility of the equipment, tools, and the attitude of the technician. Look for a machine that has plenty of vacuum but not so much that it leaves tool marks in delicate materials. Consider equipment that can be versatile as well as for other things such as ceiling cleaning, dry cleaning, and drapery cleaning. This gives you more value for the investment spent. Perhaps you need a machine that is fully capable and designed to be dry solvent cleaner compatible. This all isn't to say you can't clean most upholstery with a truck mount. As a matter of fact, in commercial cleaning of large quantities of synthetic upholstery, if you combine the power of a truck mount with a tool that is designed to take advantage of that power, you

can clean up to four to six times faster than with conventional methods. The point is to realize that not just any old machine with some upholstery tool sitting around makes you capable of cleaning upholstery.

Cleaning tools, as well, should be chosen for the fabric to be cleaned. You should have two basic tools for upholstery cleaning...one that is a conventional direct spray tool for doing heavily soiled synthetics, and two, a delicate surface tool for those fabrics that cannot stand overwetting. When you use the conventional direct spray tool on a very absorbent fabric, you are asking for problems such as bleeding and browning. Cleaning tools that apply the cleaning spray across the fabric in a shearing manner rather than directly down into the fabric speed you up and help prevent overwetting. They are probably the single best way to prevent problems in upholstery cleaning. They may take a little getting used to compared to conventional direct spray tools, but they are worth it.

Technique is also important. Assess the age of the material, the integrity of the dyes, and then qualify what you can use to clean it. You may also need to qualify the results you will get based on type of soil and the above factors. Your technique and tool stroking may be important to consider on plush fabrics, velvets, and delicate aged fabrics.

Cleaning agents or chemicals are also a major consideration. What most cleaners think is that it would be nice if there was one chemical that we could use on everything. However, as a professional, we recognize that every fabric has its own set of rules about cleaning and it would be unreasonable to think one chemical could cover all the bases. Many cleaners want to use their carpet cleaning pre-sprays on upholstery, yet many carpet cleaning pre-conditioners are far too aggressive for upholstery cleaning. Aggressive pre-treatments are fine for synthetics, but they will cause a lot of problems for cleaning delicate natural materials. Here the best advice is to ask for help from a professional supplier that knows what your needs are.

Some simple common sense applications will help you use your chemicals more effectively. MEASURE and use the cleaning chemicals according to the manufacturers directions. Remember that the most common soiling problems to upholstery (hair, body oils, and food) are different than those of carpeting. An ammonia based prespray that self-neutralizes may be your best prespray because it is effective on upholstery soils, is fairly aggressive, and it will not leave an alkaline residue on the fabric. When using an ammonia based prespray remember, that there absolutely must be adequate ventilation. If ammonia bothers you or your customers, then you will need to carefully select a prespray that is lower in pH (preferably less than 9) with a citrus solvent formulation since you'll be spraying pre-spray in the breathing zone. You will also need a neutral pH prespray that is specifically designed for cotton fabrics. You may want to avoid the use of some popular Haitian cotton shampoos if possible, as they contain a reducing bleach that be a severe respiratory irritant and leave a strange fragrance on the fabric. If you want to use a shampoo to clean upholstery with, consider either a formulated upholstery shampoo that can be applied with a rotary brush and dry vacuumed off, or for more severely soiled synthetic upholstery, consider the use of a shampoo/solvent formulation as a prespray or a rinse. You will need an acid anti-browning spray to apply to most upholstery which can help prevent browning or bleeding.

Be prepared to offer a fabric protector. Once you have pleased your customer by cleaning, it only stands to reason they would like to keep it looking clean as long as possible. A quality fabric protector is the answer. Here again, look to your supplier for the right protector for the right fabric. You will also find that fabric protection to be an easy and lucrative sales add-on.

In summary, we can readily recognize reasons why we clean upholstery. One is that our customers or boss may demand it, but even more importantly, if people have furniture and that furniture is used, they need it cleaned. This field is not only a good money-making diversification but it affords the cleaner of carpet extended opportunity for filling in slow times of the year. If you are a cleaning contractor that charges for your services, making money in upholstery cleaning requires that you identify your market and look at your productivity as it relates to cleaning performance. Remember that time is money, The faster you can clean the less you can charge, but you have to do it safely, and without overwetting.

In pricing your services, obviously, you must first know what your costs are. There are a few other rules for pricing it right:

1. Don't ever price anything over your shoulder (with just a glance)
2. Don't ever include it "cause you're there!"
3. Don't ever assume it's like the last easy one you did
4. Don't ever quote anything till you determine operating costs.
5. Don't ever class yourself with the cheap shot.
6. Price is determined by expectation or time involvement

There is no substitute for quality! The upholstery cleaning market can be a lucrative field.

But we have some news for you. Even if you can't convince yourself that you like upholstery cleaning, you had better learn how to do it. It is an expectation of your customer or your boss that you will be able to clean it. It may be, as some have categorized it, "a necessary evil," but the more you learn about it, the better off you will be. The better approach is to look at upholstery cleaning as an opportunity to meet the needs of your customers, and provide them with a healthier, cleaner, and longer lasting piece of fine furniture. If you take the time to educate yourself and the owner of that upholstery, you'll be the hero in the end.