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CARPET SPOTTING SUCCESS ANALYSIS

The professional carpet cleaner begins to realize the importance of spot and stain treatment and/or removal when he/she completes the cleaning of a customer's house. If a house had 1000 square feet of severely soiled carpeting, then the professional cleaner could apply the technology he/she had acquired, to clean 999 1/2 square feet perfectly. Unfortunately, when the cleaning job was completed, there was one small green spot in the living room that did not come out. When the carpet consumer judges the success of the cleaner, inevitably, no matter how perfect the 999 1/2 square feet look, they seem to concentrate on the one small green stain that did not come out. So it goes with the professional carpet cleaner. His/her ability to improve the appearance of a carpet that has been affected by a spot or stain is the main measure by which many of his/her customers judge the overall cleaning job.

Generally, our success in spot and stain removal and treatment is judged by our customers solely by appearance improvement in the carpeting. Can we see the spot or stain anymore? To an outsider, that may be all right. But as professionals, we know that we must evaluate many things in relationship to judging our spotting success. Obviously, how much we have improved the appearance of the carpet when doing spot or stain treatment or removal is very important. As professionals, though, we need to go one step further. We need to evaluate the success of our efforts also by what affect our spot and stain removal procedures and chemicals had on the carpet itself.

There are at least six major components we should evaluate when analyzing our spotting success. A careful evaluation of the carpet will be necessary. First, does the affected area look better? How much have we either removed the discoloration, made it invisible, or lightened it? Secondly, what did our agitation efforts on the spot, as well as the strong spotting chemical we used, do to the texture of the carpet itself? Thirdly, what did our agitation efforts and spotting chemicals do to the construction of the carpet itself and the components that hold the carpet together? Fourth, did we leave behind spotting chemical or residue from the spot itself, that is going to act as a soil attractant and cause the carpet to resoil quickly? Fifth, even if the discoloration is gone, what are the chances it will wick back up from the backing as the carpet dries? Finally, what affect did our efforts have on the dye stability of the carpet itself?

APPEARANCE

When we are judging our success in spot removal and stain treatment, we first look at improvement in carpet appearance. Have our efforts removed the discoloration? Did they at least lighten the discoloration so that it is not so obvious? Many times, when we are using the advanced spotting technology of reducing bleaches for stain treatment, we don't necessarily remove the stain, but we make it so no one can see it, thus accomplishing the same thing.

TEXTURE

Most carpet is manufactured with fibers twisted together to form a carpet yarn. That twist is set in the carpet by heat setting to various degrees to hold that twist in place. Each kind of carpet fiber that is commonly used today, whether it be nylon, polyester, olefin, acrylic, or wool, has characteristics which affect the carpet texture. Every professional knows that when we are treating a spot or stain, we use a tamping or blotting action rather than rubbing action. The more we rub an area, the more we permanently affect the twist and texture of the carpet. This can lead to the carpet looking different in the treated area even if the spot is gone. Once the twist and texture of the carpet have been affected, it is almost impossible to improve that damage. Most of the time, the damage we can cause to twist and texture is from our aggressive agitation efforts. However, especially with wool carpet fibers, too high of an alkalinity in the spotting chemical can cause felting of the yarn, leading to an actual reduction of the fiber.

CONSTRUCTION

The next evaluation we must take is our affect on the construction of the carpet itself. Did our spotting chemicals or agitation have an effect on the latex that holds the primary and secondary backing together in a tufted carpet? Very often, solvent spotters and

strong bleaches can literally dissolve the latex. You can see this by turning the carpet over and pulling on the secondary backing. If it separates from the primary backing, we have caused permanent damage to the construction of the carpet itself. We have not only affected the dimensional stability of the carpeting in that area, we may have shortened the life of the carpet because carpet tufts will start coming up prematurely, leaving areas of the carpet literally with holes in them. Generally, this is caused by overuse of solvent spotters. In our efforts to dissolve the solvent soluble spot, we may remove the spotting substance; but if our efforts permanently affect the construction of the carpet, that must be considered. With a glue down carpet, the overuse of solvent spotters can often dissolve the glue causing bubbling in the carpeting. This is often the problem on glue-down carpeting with large quantities of chewing gum. Cautious and limited application of the solvent or the use of a solvent spotting gel can reduce the likelihood of this occurrence. The weave strength in a woven carpet can be affected by too aggressive of agitation. Special care should be used when spotting woven carpets to make sure we do not become too aggressive with agitation.

RESIDUES THAT CAUSE RESOILING

Many times, a cleaner is called because the area that he/she spotted is now very dark and dirty. Residue left behind from the spotting chemical or incomplete removal of the spot itself can contribute to this. These sticky residues collect soil from people's shoes as they walk across the carpet, or they collect airborne soils. This is usually caused by the application of a non-volatile solvent spotting solution that is not rinsed by a volatile solvent spotting solution. A non-volatile solvent spotter will not evaporate by definition, and since it is solvent based, even heavily rinsing or extracting the area will not completely remove the solution. Non-volatile solvent spotters must be rinsed out after application with a volatile solvent spotter. Sugary spots, particularly, caramelized sugar residues, and solvent soluble spots, that are not completely removed during spotting procedures will also often lead to resoiling.

WICKING

When large amounts of liquid material are spilled onto a carpeting, if the liquid does not bead up at the top of the carpet, it soaks down into the backing of the carpet and spreads out. This is particularly a characteristic of properly functioning stain resistant carpet. The spilled material cannot penetrate the carpet fiber, so the only place it has to go is down to the backing of the carpet where it spreads out. A spot that may only appear to be the size of a coin on the top of the carpet may well be the size of a plate on the back of the carpet. When the professional cleaner comes along and removes the spot with his/her cleaning process, as the carpet dries, there will be an upward flow of moisture from the backing. This upward flow of moisture is defined as wicking. The spilled liquid material will wick up from the backing of the carpet and end up depositing itself on the top of the carpet fibers. Thus, when the cleaner finishes the cleaning job, the spot is gone, but after the carpet dries, the spot will reappear due to wicking, often appearing bigger than the original spot was. The way to prevent wicking is to anticipate it. If a large amount of liquid or a strong dye is spilled onto a carpet, assume it will wick back up after removal and take appropriate steps. These steps might include the creation of poultice, using absorbent towels and a weight to allow the spot to wick up into the absorbent towel. One might employ the use of an absorbent powder such as diatomaceous earth, or a formulated absorbent material for spotting, or the use of an absorbent compound cleaning chemical that will absorb the spilled material.

DYE STABILITY/COLOR LOSS

Finally, we must judge the effects of our spotting chemicals upon the dye stability of the carpet. If their use has led to color loss from the carpet, or has affected the colorfastness of the carpet over the long run, we must decide whether those spotting solutions should be used in the first place. This is definitely the case when we use reducing or oxidizing bleaches or when we employ the heat transfer process in an attempt to remove or make invisible discoloration and fugitive dyes. The use of these chemicals and procedures always must employ the risk that we might also remove color from the carpeting. This should always be discussed and agreed to by the customer before beginning these procedures.

In summary, there is more to judging our success in spot or stain treatment or removal than by appearance. Often times, the customer may instruct us to employ a "kill it or cure it" attitude, whereby the potential damage we may create takes a secondary role in evaluation as compared to appearance improvement. As long as the customer has been informed of this, understands it, and has agreed to it, then it is acceptable. But as professionals, we must always realize all of the effects of the actions, procedures, and chemicals that we may employ. Many of the above stated problems are caused by over-zealousness, and by misapplication or over-application of the chemistry that we use. We must look inside of ourselves in evaluating our success, even if by all "appearances", we are doing a great job.

About the author:

R. Doyle Bloss is the Chief Executive Officer for Steam Way International, Inc., in Denver, Colorado. Doyle teaches many courses and schools and is involved in the development and quality control of Steam Way's complete chemical line. Steam Way manufactures a complete line of specialized and advance spotting chemicals for carpeting and also has a special training school specifically on spot and stain treatment and removal that uses hands-on application to better understand many of the principles discussed in this article. Doyle can be reached by calling Steam Way International, Inc. at (303) 355-3566.