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Upholstery Cleaning Opportunities

*Everyone concentrates on the carpet.
It's time to look at other opportunities for additional revenue.*

By Dennis Russell

A condominium owner in Chicago has his carpet cleaned twice per year.

Invariably, the charge is \$150, and the technicians are in and out of the unit in about 45 minutes.

The last time the carpet was cleaned, the owner asked if the carpet cleaning company could also clean an upholstered chair and ottoman in the bedroom. The company charged \$75, and the additional cleaning took about 10 minutes.

At \$75 in 10 minutes, it's a mystery why more carpet cleaning technicians are not aggressively marketing upholstery cleaning services.

But, typically, the customer often asks for the additional service. The technicians, at least in this case, did not ask or, possibly worse, even *thought* to ask if this customer wanted the chair and ottoman cleaned.

To take this omission even further, at the 2010 Connections Convention and Trade Show in Las Vegas, there were several presentations discussing the intricacies of rug and carpet cleaning and several presentations on growing a carpet cleaning business, but not one devoted specifically to upholstery cleaning.

How can this lucrative add-on service be so overlooked?

There are a variety of reasons, from lack of knowledge about upholstery fabrics and how upholstery should be cleaned, to a lack of familiarity with the tools and accessories that make upholstery cleaning relatively quick, easy and customer-satisfying.

A history lesson

Bill Bryson is a very unusual author. He likes to write about the history of things and how they came about.

His latest book, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*, focuses on the development of the western-style home that many of us live in today.

One of the discoveries Bryson writes about is dining rooms.

Apparently, there were few dining rooms in private homes until the late 18th century and they were devel-

oped, not because "people suddenly decided they wanted a room dedicated to eating, but to allow guests to sit in upholstered chairs [so they] could wipe their fingers on the upholstered furniture."

Apparently, the mistress of the household believed having these chairs was necessary, as was having a particular room dedicated just to eating. "This way, guests could wipe their hands on the dining room chairs and not the really good furniture in the living room."

It's hoped that people today have better manners than they did some 300 years ago, but it would not surprise

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me to learn that some technicians have cleaned upholstered dining room chairs that look like they were used as a napkin.

The important thing before cleaning any upholstered chair, dining room or otherwise, is to be able to identify the fabric covering the chair. This is typically accomplished with a fiber identification "burn test."

Although there are others, the following are the main fabrics used for upholstered furniture:

- Wool
- Cotton
- Linen
- Rayon
- Nylon
- Polyester
- Acrylic
- Olefin

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Wool, cotton and linen are natural fibers. Rayon is regenerated cellulose. The remaining fibers are synthetic.

These synthetic fabrics can vary in price, durability, colorfastness and flammability (unless treated) and, for our purposes, some are easier to clean than others, such as olefin, which is non-absorbent and fairly stain resistant.

As to cleaning, most can and are often best cleaned using hot-water extraction methods.

Of course, a test of the fabric in an inconspicuous area is always warranted and there are some exceptions to using water-based cleaning methods. For instance, Haitian cotton, which is typically white, goes in and out of style but is still used for upholstery. The use of water to clean this fabric can create a chemical reaction resulting in cellulosic browning.

Upholstery cleaning tools

Before actual cleaning begins using the extractor, the upholstered item to be cleaned should be thoroughly vacu-

umed to remove surface soiling. Also, remove any loose pillows and use a vacuum attachment to clean cushion crevices.

Carpet extractor manufacturers started putting more time and effort into developing upholstery cleaning tools that could be attached to a carpet extractor in the mid-1970s.

Although some of these early tools proved quite comfortable to use, many of the early attachments were heavy, difficult and tiring to handle, would apply too much or too little water and had a tendency to "heat up."

Most of these issues have been rectified. Some of the upholstery tools now available offer features such as:

- An adjustable vacuum release that allows for the cleaning of delicate fabrics even if using a truckmount system
- Aluminum heads that are light but durable
- Polished stainless steel to minimize burrs and snagging

- Built-in bypass to maintain desired water temperature and more even chemical flow
- Tools designed to be used with both portables and truckmounts with variable pounds per square inch
- "Jetless" cleaning technology where the water/solution is under constant, controlled flow so there is no trigger valve or spray jet.

As you can see, the different upholstery tools have varied features. Most of the units produced today by major manufacturers will do a good to excellent job. What is key when making a selection is to simply test the different systems.

Ultimately, selecting an upholstery tool is a very personal decision for a technician because we all are different.

Training, however, applies to all. Fortunately, there are now a number of ways to learn more about upholstery cleaning.

Needs cutting

Put training at the top of your upholstery cleaning list and it will serve as your foundation for taking advantage of this lucrative add-on service.

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