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Carpets: Clean and Odor Free

By Robert Kravitz

With the mega increases in the cost of gasoline in the past year, many people have turned to carpooling for the first time. The days of the one-car/one-driver freeway — still quite common — are gradually being phased out in many areas of the country, replaced with multiple passenger cars.

People who used to drive alone are now sharing their cars with other passengers — making them a bit more aware of how clean their cars are, inside and out. Along with this, car owners are increasingly concerned that their cars are odor free. We can't expect our vehicles to still have that "new car" smell, but as long as they do not smell of smoke, fried chicken, sour milk, mildew, or any number of unpleasant odors, we are fine.

LIMITED REMEDIES

But, what if the car does have lingering odors? Car owners have a number of ways to address the problem — some that work and some that do not help much at all. For instance, one recommendation is to sprinkle baking soda on the carpeting. Baking soda does absorb odors. However, as it ages, it becomes embedded in carpet by passengers' feet, and if it is vacuumed up when cleaning, it loses its effectiveness.

Some drivers also like to mist their cars with white vinegar. Vinegar is a healthy and inexpensive cleaner, and many people use it for both household cleaning and as a deodorizer. Misting it on carpets, upholstery, and in the trunk can help prevent the growth of mold, mildew, and bacteria, which can cause odors, as well as eradicate those that already exist. As a deodorizer, vinegar can be effective, but eventually, its odor-killing properties diminish and evaporate.

A third option is to just mask the odor. A variety of "cover-up" products, air fresheners, and even aromatherapy oils are available for car use. One type of aromatherapy product plugs into the car's cigarette lighter (if it still has one) and time-releases calming fragrances such as lavender, sandalwood, and chamomile. It's a nice idea, and it certainly can help make a car smell terrific temporarily, but it does little or nothing about actually eradicating odors.

Eventually drivers experiencing a malodor problem in their cars realize they have only one option: visit a professional auto detailer and get to the root of the problem and eliminate the odor. In most cases, this can be accomplished thoroughly and relatively inexpensively, allowing drivers to be proud of their cars.

ARE CHEMICALS NECESSARY?

Cleaning professionals may consider using carpet-cleaning chemicals sparingly. Recent studies indicate that when using a hot-water extractor, there appears to be little difference in cleaning effectiveness whether chemicals or just clear water is used in the cleaning process.

If chemicals are used, it is best to pre-spray soiled areas, allow the chemical a few minutes to "dwell" on the stain, and then use the extractor. Additionally, excessive use of cleaning chemicals can cause components of the extractor to deteriorate — another reason to use them sparingly.

ODOR ROOTS

“Without question, the first step in eliminating an interior car odor problem is to find and then remove the source,” says Stephen Romero, head of the Professional Auto Care Line at U.S. Products, manufacturers of professional carpet, floor, and restoration cleaning equipment. “Until the source of the odor is located and removed, the malodor will continue to be a problem.”

Romero says that many interior odors in cars emanate from the carpets and upholstery. Fortunately, the human nose is a good indicator of odor and auto-detailing professionals can be thankful they don't have to crawl on the floor and smell carpet to locate contaminated areas. If necessary, a black light or high-intensity ultraviolet light, which can be used during the day, can be employed to detect hard-to-find odors. Carpet cleaning professionals often use these devices, especially if they are trying to detect pet odors such as urine in carpets.

“In the process of locating the source of the odor, [a good first step is] to ask the car's owner if he or she already knows where the source of the odor is and what the culprit may be,” Romero says. “This can save a lot of time and determine not only where the source [of the odor problem] is located, but what type of cleaning chemical would be most effective at removing the source.”

If the odor problem is the result of food spills and other “accidents,” it can penetrate to the base of the carpet. “The odor that develops is really the result of microbial and bacteria growth,” says Romero. “And as it grows, the odor typically becomes worse and the interior of the car more and more unhealthy.”

ODOR REMOVAL

Because many odor problems are the result of bacterial growth, an antibacterial solution may need to be used to eliminate the odor. This is most effective if it is presprayed on the carpet or upholstery and then the area is cleaned with a portable hot-water extractor using clear water.

Note that the extractor should be a hot-water machine. Studies going back more than a century prove that heat improves the effectiveness of cleaning chemicals. Some extractors provide instant and constant heat of 212 degrees Fahrenheit at the wand tip. “Additionally, the heat combined with a low-moisture hot-water extractor improves drying time markedly,” says Romero. “The carpets dry faster, and there is less chance that mold or mildew will develop.”

A problem that carpet cleaning technicians can encounter when cleaning carpets in homes and commercial facilities is that the padding underneath the carpet also becomes saturated with the spill or odor-causing agents. In some cases, the padding will need to be replaced in order to thoroughly eliminate the odor. However, auto carpets typically have a relatively thin pad, and the extractor, if it has at least 100 psi and more than 135 inches of water lift, should be able to penetrate the area and remove the source of the odor.

PERSISTENT PROBLEMS

Although food spills that cause odors can usually be removed by employing the procedures discussed here, removing some odors such as smoke will require additional tools and measures. This is especially true if the smoke has penetrated the car's interior leather and trim. In this case, a quick and easy way to permanently remove the odor is through the use of ozone.

Electronic ozone machines have been used for years in restoration cleaning after floods, fires, and similar disasters. In many cases, ozone can eliminate odors caused by not only smoke and tobacco but also garbage, mold, mildew, and pets. “However, here again, the source of the odor must first be located and removed,” Romero says. “This means that the carpets, upholstery, and trim must be cleaned first and

then the ozone can be applied.”

Ozone is a bit complicated to understand, and auto detailers should have some idea of how ozone machines work — especially if they must explain the process to customers. Ozone is produced in an ozone generator by applying an electric current to two conductors encapsulated in a stainless steel tube.

“A ‘corona’ is formed between the two conductors, and as oxygen molecules pass through the corona, the molecules are reconfigured forming ozone,” explains Romero. “As the ozone encounters odor-producing molecules, it oxidizes them, essentially destroying them. When this happens the odor is totally removed from the car.”

Recently, new ozone-generating systems have been introduced with an “ozone kit” allowing the ozone generator to sit on top of the car with the ozone piped into the car’s interior. Usually the machine takes only about 20 to 30 minutes to effectively deodorize the car’s interior.

According to Romero, one of the first questions both auto-detailing professionals and customers have about the equipment is whether it is safe. Ozone is completely safe for the car, its interior, and the environment as long as no people or living things are in the car while it is being used. “Remember, this is a tried-and-true cleaning technique,” says Romero. “But it must be used by trained operators. Fortunately, the training is easy, making ozone safe and effective.”

CLEAN = HEALTHY

When cleaning the interior of an automobile, professional detailers must realize that — just like cleaning professionals cleaning homes and buildings — they are cleaning for more than appearance; they are cleaning for health. Carpet, whether in a car or an office, is a catchall, and if it is not cleaned regularly and properly, it can not only result in odors but can negatively affect the interior air quality of the car, which can impact health. Poor indoor air quality, especially for people that drive one or more hours per day can cause headaches, respiratory problems, and even asthma attacks.

Recent studies have found that carpets can become much more contaminated than previously realized. Although the studies were conducted in buildings, many of their results can apply to cars as well. Passengers in cars are in a much smaller, enclosed space, and the impact of contaminated carpets can be much greater. An effective carpet care program, including the use of hot-water extraction and ozone generators for hard-to-eliminate odors, can keep cars clean and their passengers healthy.

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