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Greening Floor Care Finding the Right Chemicals, Equipment and Training

BY CHRISTOPHER **R. T**RICOZZI

Greening floor care is fairly simple. It just takes the right chemicals, the right equipment, and the right training.

But while the steps are straightforward, going green in floor care is actually more arduous. This is because the development of environmentally preferable chemicals and equipment for floor care has lagged behind that for products used for other cleaning tasks. And this is unfortunate because floor care is one of the most environmentally unfriendly cleaning tasks we perform.

For instance, most finishes contain zinc and other heavy metals that can negatively affect human and animal health. And in California, the chemical slurry that results from stripping a floor is considered so harmful that it can no longer be poured down the drain. Instead, it must be properly sealed and deposited in a hazardous waste facility. Because of floor care chemicals' negative impact on the environment and health, many facilities are trying to reduce floor strip/refinish cycles to once a year or even less often.

Green Floor Care Chemicals

"Our customers want green cleaning chemicals," says Mike Sawchuk, vice-president and general manager of Enviro-Solutions, a green chemical manufacturer. "But green is not enough. They must also perform well and be cost effective. And that has been a problem with some environmentally preferable floor care chemicals."

The problem with creating green floor care products is that many of the chemicals used in conventional products, from the powerful ingredients that melt away the old finish to the finish itself, have been hard to replicate. In one product trial, custodial workers cleaning New York state government buildings tested 23 environmentally friendly floor care finishes, but found only two that performed as well as the conventional products they had been using for years.

Similar difficulties were encountered selecting a green stripper.

However, "green-certified finishes and strippers do exist, and some are proving to be excellent performers and cost effective," said Sawchuck. "Building service contractors (BSCs) should work with distributors well versed on green cleaning products and ask for their recommendations. Then [they should] try different brands to see which work best for them." If all else fails, Sawchuk advises looking for conventional floor care chemicals that have:

- A pH no higher than 11.5;
- Phosphorous concentrations of less than 0.5 percent;
- A flash point above 150° F; Flash point is the lowest temperature at which a liquid will generate

sufficient vapor to flash (ignite) when exposed to a source of ignition;

- Less than 7 percent volatile organic compounds;
- No known carcinogens, metals, or aqueous ammonia.

Green Equipment Selection

According to Mark Cuddy, regional sales manager with Tornado, a manufacturer of professional cleaning equipment, a green floor machine does three things: scrubs deeper, uses less chemical and water, and protects the air.

Cuddy suggests that BSCs use brushes instead of conventional pads when working on uneven or grouted floors. “The brushes can penetrate better into the grout or uneven spots, whereas a pad, even a scrubbing pad, simply does not have the contact pressure for removing deeply entrenched soils,” he says. “The more effective the brush, the less chemical and water necessary, making the equipment more environmentally friendly.”

Cuddy says one floorcare system that tends to use less water and chemical are cylindrical floor machines. “They use brushes and have greater contact-pressure on floors than do conventional rotary machines,” he says. “In recent independent tests it was found that these machines use considerably less chemical and water. Also, the cylindrical brushes last much longer than conventional pads, reducing environmental waste.”

Some new floor scrubbers are also designed to more precisely use chemicals and have an electronic solenoid to prevent accidental solution flow when the machine is not in use. Both help save chemical and water and help protect the environment. Finally, if potentially harmful chemicals or bacteria are on the floor, these may be released into the air with burnishing, posing a potential health risk. To correct this problem, more burnishers are coming out with deck shrouds to trap contaminants as the machine is used and high-filtration vacuum systems to capture them.

“Fortunately, some floor care manufacturers have made significant inroads in protecting the environment in just the past couple of years,” says Cuddy. “If selecting a new floor machine today, BSCs should look for one with these green features.”

Green Training

Very often, when green cleaning is introduced into a facility, there is some resistance from the cleaning crew. After all, if the old system has worked, why change?

“We need to explain it’s for their health,” says Stephen Ashkin, president of the Ashkin Group and the Green Cleaning Network. “We now know that using green equipment and products helps decrease employee complaints of nausea, headaches, and eye and skin irritations, which reduces absenteeism and boosts productivity.”

When transferring over to green floor care chemicals and equipment, along with explaining how to use the new products and machines, Ashkin advises telling workers why they have been selected.

“Cleaning workers have always been taught that their job, especially when it comes to floor care, is to make facilities nice and shiny,” he says. “But with green cleaning in place, they should understand that there is a bigger picture and that keeping the indoor environment healthy is actually their primary goal.” □

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