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Third-Generation Encapsulation Products Make Big Impact

By Dawn Shoemaker — posted 09/15/2011



Mark Warner is president of the Low Moisture Carpet Cleaners Association and director of training for Enviro-Solutions, a manufacturer of certified, environmentally preferable cleaning products. He was recently asked about encapsulation carpet cleaning, a technology that's getting increased attention in the cleaning industry. Highlights from

the interview follow.

Could you explain what low-moisture carpet cleaning is all about?

Very simply, low-moisture carpet cleaning refers to using carpet cleaning equipment and procedures that ensure carpets dry in two hours or less. This helps the carpet dry more evenly, eliminating spots from wicking back and traffic lanes from developing as a result of moisture in the carpet. Additionally, it minimizes the possibility of mold or mildew developing, especially when there is excessive humidity in the environment.

What exactly is encapsulation carpet cleaning?

In the simplest terms, encapsulation chemicals—or encapsulates—are a form of detergent that work their way into carpet fibers. Encapsulates attach themselves to soils, dry, and break down into minute, powder-like particulates that are vacuumed up with regular maintenance. Encapsulates can be applied to carpets using a variety of carpet cleaning methods such as bonnet cleaning, rotary shampoo, and extraction. They also can be used for spotting.

Is this a new technology?

No, it actually dates back to the 1950s and 1960s. Just as today, encapsulates would separate the soil from the carpet fiber, encapsulating the soil; the soil and chemical were then vacuumed up. However, there were problems with these early methods, such as quick resoiling due to chemical residues left in the carpet. These residues were sticky and tacky, and it turned out the carpet did not dry thoroughly or fast enough, which led to resoiling.

Do these problems still exist?

Yes in some cases, but that is why more advanced encapsulation systems are getting more and more attention among carpet cleaners. In the 1980s, acrylic copolymers, similar to what is in floor finish, were added, which helped encapsulates dry faster into a hard shell on the carpet fibers. Although a big step forward, this had some drawbacks, most specifically that the acrylic residues could still collect in carpet fibers. They would then dry to an amber brown, marring the appearance of the carpet. In the 1990s, a second generation of encapsulate technology was born using fluorocarbon chemistry. Although it had great promise, there were still problems and

the government had some concerns that there might be long-lasting health effects and environmental concerns.

So where do we stand now?

We are now in the third generation of this technology and I am happy to say nearly all of the bugs in the older methods have been eliminated. These new encapsulate chemicals strip the soil and residue from carpet fibers, making them easier to vacuum up. Browning and resoiling are no longer issues. Also, they are getting greener. Some of these third-generation products can also be used to clean grout areas in tile floors or on rubber flooring, which can be difficult to clean.

Is there a downside to this third-generation technology?

It's not so much a downside as it is a reality. Some manufacturers make lower-quality encapsulation products that cost very little but simply do not perform as well as the higher-quality products that do cost more. These lower-cost products can prove to be a problem for carpet cleaning technicians because the name of the game in this industry is repeat business. If the carpets do not come out well after cleaning, you probably will never hear from that customer again. But if they come out very clean and maintain that "like-new" appearance, the technician now has a loyal customer, which means the costlier encapsulation product becomes an investment that pays dividends.

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