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First IMPRESSIONS

The importance of proper carpet cleaning in restaurants.

You might be surprised by just how important the cleaning and maintenance of carpets are to customers dining in a restaurant. The following blog received a variety of comments, most agreeing with the blogger:

"When you open the door [of a restaurant] and take a deep breath, what do you smell? If you do not smell food, I suggest you go to another restaurant. . . . I think that is [fair] to say for a restaurant. If you open the door and smell smoke from cigarettes, maybe they should install a smoke eater to filter the air. But if you open the door and smell a funky smell, it's most likely from soiled or mildewed carpet. The restaurant is sacrificing your health to save money on carpet cleaning. Do not be embarrassed to tell them they have cleaning issues[;] remember you are PAYING THEM [blogger's capitalization]."

In few other settings is a carpet required to handle as much use, traffic, debris and soiling as in a restaurant. The soiling is usually made up of dry soils such as sand and grit from shoe bottoms, grease and oils that have become airborne in the kitchen and have drifted into the dining room, and sugars and moisture from spilled drinks and food. Amplifying the problem, much of this soil becomes mixed together and with foot traffic pushed deep into carpet fibers, making it all the more difficult to remove.

Where installed, carpets cover the largest single surface in a

restaurant. Because of this, and because carpeting is costly and proper care and maintenance can extend the life cycle of the carpet considerably, restaurant owners, managers and cleaning professionals should have a strong overall knowledge of how to minimize carpet soiling as well as how and when restaurant carpets should be cleaned. This is important because not only is proper carpet maintenance a cost saver in the long run, when it is properly cleaned, maintained and odor-free, carpet can be a guest pleaser as well.

THE ROLE OF MATTING

When the economy took a nosedive in 2008, one of the first segments of the professional cleaning industry to be negatively impacted was the matting segment. This tells us that matting systems are still undervalued by many end customers. They may realize matting helps promote safety but are apparently unaware of the important role it plays in keeping restaurants and other facilities clean and healthy.

Studies indicate that as much as 85% of all soiling brought into a facility is walked in through the front door on the bottoms of people's shoes. Of this, about 80% is dry soil and the rest oil

or moist soiling. This is why matting systems of 10 to 12 feet should be installed both outside and inside a facility.

And in restaurants we need to take this a step further. Matting systems of approximately 5 to 6 feet should be installed inside and outside passageways going from the kitchen to the dining room as well as in foodservice areas within the dining room. As added protection, some restaurants have also installed smaller matting systems in walkways leading to restrooms.

The goal of all of these mats — referred to as a high-performance matting system — in addition to promoting safety, is to catch and trap or "store" soils as well as grease and moisture before they can reach and soil carpets. In fact, mats play such an important role in keeping facilities and their carpets clean and healthy that the U.S. Green

Building Council's LEED certification program allows building and restaurant owners to earn at least one credit just for having proper matting systems installed at major entries.*

THE NITTY-GRITTY OF PROPER RESTAURANT CARPET CARE

No matter how effective the matting system, eventually restaurant carpets will need to be cleaned. Before discussing the procedure, it should be emphasized that carpets should be cleaned in restaurant facilities on a set schedule and not just when soiling or odors are noticeable. Carpet cleaning on a regular schedule is viewed as a *preventive* measure that helps keep carpets clean and healthy all the time. Waiting until they are noticeably soiled to clean them is referred to as *restorative*, which can be far more expensive, result in some permanent staining, and shorten the life span of the carpet.

The following procedures for cleaning carpets are recommended by IICRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification), a nonprofit

CLEANING SOLUTION

The types of solutions used to clean restaurant carpets can differ from the formulas used for other types of carpet cleaning. A high-alkaline solution (with a pH reading above 10 or 12) is often recommended. However, managers and carpet cleaning technicians must ensure that using chemicals with this level of alkalinity does not void the carpet manufacturer's warranty. Additionally, some technicians use an enzymatic cleaning solution when cleaning carpets. The enzymes are designed to "digest" protein soils from food-related particles that find their way onto carpets.

organization that develops standards, trains and certifies carpet cleaning professionals, and educates the public on proper carpet care:

Dry soil removal: Restaurant carpets should be vacuumed regularly; this is one of the most effective ways to keep them clean. In addition, they should be vacuumed before carpet cleaning (a step that is often forgotten) so that carpet soils do not mix with the cleaning solution, making it harder to remove them.

Spotting: Before cleaning, restaurant staff and cleaning professionals should look for carpet spots and stains that may need special attention. Using a professional spotting kit, these spots should be removed prior to cleaning.

Pre-spray and agitation: Most carpet cleaning professionals now spray cleaning agents di-

rectly onto the carpets before cleaning instead of mixing it in the solution tank. This tends to use less chemical, making it more environmentally friendly, and allows the chemical to "dwell" on the carpet so it can begin loosening and dissolving carpet soils for removal. Additionally, for restaurant carpets specifically, it is often wise to agitate the carpet with a groomer or brush, especially in heavily soiled areas, before extraction. This helps work the cleaning solution into the carpet fibers. (See sidebar.)

Extract: Without question, hot-water extraction is the most effective way to clean carpets and should be the system of choice to clean restaurant carpets. But because restaurant carpets can become so soiled, managers selecting a carpet cleaning technician should ask if the technician uses "truckmount" extractors. For instance, a CDS (clutch drive system) extractor uses the power of

the technician's van to generate restorative cleaning pressure of 400 to 500psi, powerful enough to remove deeply embedded soiling.

Neutralize: In some situations, a neutralizing rinse agent or acid rinse to counter the high alkaline content often found in carpet soil may need to be applied to the carpets after cleaning. This helps prevent rapid resoiling or even discoloring of the carpets.

Drying: Proper ventilation along with the placement of air movers throughout the dining room will help ensure that carpets are dry within 6 to 8 hours.

CLEANING COSTS


Carpet cleaning in all types of facilities, including restaurants, tends to be price driven. However, restaurant managers who select carpet cleaning technicians based on costs alone may be disappointed. An IICRC-trained

carpet cleaner using top-quality, state-of-the-art truckmount carpet cleaning equipment such as the CDS system mentioned earlier is a professional, well-trained, and well-equipped cleaning technician. Hiring these people and paying a bit more can pay big dividends in guest satisfaction and carpet longevity over time. ♦


Chris Ryan is a project engineer with HydraMaster Corporation; he has been with the company for 16 years. Ryan's main focus is truckmount design from conceptualizing the product to production release.

** In addition to being worth a LEED credit, the Green Seal GS-42 Environmental Standards consider matting part of a green cleaning program; in both situations, a minimum of 10 to 12 feet of high-performance matting must be installed at all entrances to qualify.*

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