

## Ridding Cars of Odor Problems

By Stephen J. Romero

Your customers don't want to own a car that emits foul odors whenever the doors are opened. When one of their friends accepts a ride, the last thing they want is to be asked, "What's that awful stench?" or, worse, to watch as their acquaintance pretends not to notice the foul smell.



The embarrassment of a car filled with the lingering odor of pets, spilled soda, cigarettes, sour milk, mildew, or any number of sickly scents is enough to send a car owner running to the experts--auto detailers like you--for help.

Sometimes malodors in a car accumulate before owners really notice them. Maybe they were at the park with the dogs and it started to rain so they all jumped in the car to

leave. Now a “wet dog smell” has been embedded in their upholstery. Perhaps they let a friend smoke cigarettes in the car while they drove him home, not realizing how long that odor would hang around. Or maybe their toddler spilled chocolate milk on her car seat on the way home from the grocery store. That one spill can turn into a “stinking” mess surprisingly quickly. In addition, the sugars in the drink attract even more soil and grime, which turn into bacteria, causing even more malodors to develop.

Dirty diapers, cracker crumbs, fast-food wrappers, empty soda cans, and candy are among some of the items that contribute to odor problems in your customers' cars. And most often, instead of treating the problem right away when it can more easily be addressed, they wait until the odor and interior sanitation state of their cars have gotten out of hand—and that’s when they come to you, their detailer, to take action.

### **Eradicating Odors at the Source**

The first step in removing odors from your customers' cars is cleaning by attacking the source, which in most cases is the

car's carpet, upholstery, and fabric areas. These areas should be cleaned with *hot-water* carpet extractors.

Hot water (or heated cleaning solution) is important, because it improves the effectiveness of the cleaning chemicals, and when it comes to eradicating odors, detailers may need all the help they can get. Select extractors that have an instant heat of 212 degrees Fahrenheit at the wand tip. Also, select low-moisture extractors, which use considerably less water and solution than traditional extractors. This allows the carpet to dry much faster and prevents the buildup of mold or mildew, which can prove harmful to health.

Weight is also an issue to consider. If the machine is too heavy, it may be too difficult to maneuver and work with. Machines with large wheels and that weigh 75 pounds or less tend to work *with* the users, making cleaning and deodorizing easier.

Typically, with all fabric areas thoroughly cleaned, the source of the odor is gone. However, that does not mean the malodor is gone as well. Some odors, especially smoke, can penetrate leather and other areas of the car's interior and

are still noticeable after using proper cleaning chemicals and treatments. When this happens, detailers may need to turn to a more powerful tool to remove the odor: ozone.

## **Electronic Deodorization**

Electronic deodorization, or ozone, has been used for years to remove odors out of entire buildings, especially after fires and similar disasters. And it is often used by hotels to remove cigarette and other smoke odors from nonsmoking rooms. For those who may recall the 1980 fire at the MGM hotel in Las Vegas, ozone systems were used extensively as part of the restoration of the facility.

Ozone generators are used as a restorative treatment for carpets, drapes, fabrics, and upholstery in a variety of places, including homes, hotels, and now automobiles.

Ozone treatment permanently eliminates a number of airborne odors, including the following common but difficult-to-remove odors:

- Bacteria, mold, and mildew
- Garbage, fish, urine, feces, and pets
- Cigarettes and tobacco

- Paint fumes

Considered by many to be the most effective method for deodorizing, electronic deodorization is the first choice of carpet restorers and auto detailers across the country.

According to Jeff Bishop, a carpet and restoration expert; director of the International Society of Cleaning Technicians (ISCT); and chairman of the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning, and Restoration Certification's (IICRC) Certification Board, "The most effective method of deodorization for upholstered furniture is electronic deodorization, otherwise known as ozone. After cleaning and drying, the furniture must be treated with ozone for 24 to 48 hours or possibly longer as needed. But, in most cases, this will eliminate odors completely."

### **"How Ozone Works"**

Ozone is a gas made up of molecules consisting of three oxygen atoms and designated by the chemical symbol O<sub>3</sub>. Although ozone machines are a bit complicated, detailers should have an idea of they work. Here are the key components:

- In an ozone generator, ozone is produced by applying an electric current to two conductors sheathed in ceramic and encapsulated in a stainless steel tube.
- A corona is then formed between the two conductors through the ceramic sheath.
- When oxygen molecules pass through the corona, they are split apart, then reattach to other oxygen molecules, forming ozone.
- As these  $O_3$  molecules encounter odor-producing molecules, the odor-producing molecules are oxidized--leaving only  $O_2$  molecules, or pure oxygen--and the odor is completely removed.

Now available for auto detailers is a specially made auto ozone kit with a hermetically sealed application transformer, which forces the ozone to go directly into the car without escaping into the atmosphere around it. This unit sits conveniently on top of the car and saturates the vehicle with  $O_3$ . For effective deodorization, run the machine for 20 to 30

minutes. But be advised: *no people or living things should be in the car while the ozone generator is working.*

Because of this warning, some people have come to assume that ozone is not safe. However, ozone is safe as long as it is used properly, by trained operators, and no people, pets, or plants are in the car. In fact, used accordingly, ozone is considered one of the safest deodorizing methods available.

### **The Importance of an Odor-Free Vehicle**

Cleanliness in the car is not only about avoiding bad odors. It is also about driver health and safety. Foul odors are unpleasant as well as unhealthy. Poor air quality in your customers' vehicles, where they likely spend one to three hours a day simply commuting to and from work, can cause headaches and spawn asthma attacks. When you consider just how much time they spend in their cars—a contributing factor to the extent of how filthy their cars can get—it becomes obvious that a clean, odor-free vehicle approaches the same level of importance as that of their home or office.

Stephen Romero heads the Professional Car Care Products division at U.S. Products, manufacturers of professional floor, carpet, and restoration cleaning equipment. He may be reached at [sromero@usproducts.com](mailto:sromero@usproducts.com).

## **Sidebar:**

### ***Selecting an Ozone Generator***

One thing detailers should keep in mind when selecting an ozone generator is that many systems use plates or UV tube technology. This can result in dust and debris build up on the plates decreasing their effectiveness.

More advanced systems incorporate ceramic surrounding the stainless steel electrodes corona system preventing dust and debris build up and making them virtually maintenance free. Maintenance free systems can obviously prove to be a cost savings as they help eliminate downtime.