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Pathway soiling: How to prevent it, how to remove it

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By Dawn Shoemaker

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Most Canadians who have visited London know what the expression "Mind the Gap" means. It serves as a polite warning to passengers that there is a potentially dangerous gap between the subway platform and the subway car door.

We should have a similar warning for restaurant owners and managers regarding their carpeted dining rooms. But instead of "Mind the Gap," it would be "Mind the Path."



This would be a caution to them that the key pathways in their restaurants' carpet can become noticeably soiled. The darkening of these pathways is referred to as "pathway soiling," which develops as a result of moisture and soil being walked in on patron shoe bottoms, as well as from oil and grease that can collect on the shoe bottoms of the restaurant staff.

Because floors play a significant role in a customer's impression of a restaurant, pathway soiling on carpets can result in a very negative impression of the entire eatery. Fortunately, there are ways to help prevent and eliminate pathway soiling that not only keep the carpet looking its best but, because soils can damage a carpet, increase its longevity as well.

Let's get to the bottoms of shoes

Before discussing how to prevent and remove soils from pathways, we must first explore the most common way they get there—from the bottoms of people's shoes. A few years ago, Dr. Charles Gerba, a microbiologist with the University of Arizona, conducted an experiment. He had 10 people wear a brand-new pair of shoes for two weeks while going about their daily activities.

At the end of the two weeks, the bottoms of the shoes were swabbed and analyzed. This is what Gerba found:

- Approximately 421,000 units of bacteria were present on the shoes
- Coliform, a serious contaminant if ingested, was detected on virtually all of the shoes.
- E. coli was found on about one-third of the shoes.
- "Gray" water, food, drinks, sand, grease, oil, tar, sand, clay, and dust were also found in varying degrees on all the shoes.

Carpet fibers act like sponges. They absorb these contaminants from shoe bottoms. And because these patrons and staff tend to walk over the same carpeted paths in a restaurant, most of these contaminants are deposited on these main pathways. For a while the soils may remain hidden in the carpet fibers, but once the carpet reaches its threshold for the amount of soil it can hold, they become noticeable on the surface of the carpet in the form of dark, unsightly paths.

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Prevention

The first step to take in solving the problem of pathway soiling is to try and prevent it. "This can be accomplished through the use of high-performance matting systems," says Christopher Tricozzi, vice president of sales and marketing for Crown Mats, one of the leading matting companies in North America. "A high-performance matting system is designed to capture, trap, and hold soils and moisture before they can be walked onto carpets."

However, just placing a mat at the door or a small one inside the restaurant will not do. Tricozzi suggests as much as 15 feet of matting is necessary, including:

- Five feet of scraper mat placed outside the restaurant; scraper mats are designed to scrape off debris from shoe bottoms.
- Five feet of wiper/scraper matting placed directly inside the doors to the restaurant. These mats remove more debris as well as the moisture on shoe bottoms.
- The matting system is completed with five feet of wiper mat placed inside the restaurant. Some restaurants may place wiper mats right on the carpet if there is limited hard surface floor space at the entry. These mats are designed to remove any remaining debris and moisture from the shoes.

"What is vital to understand about a high-performance matting system is that it requires three different types of mats, each five feet long, all working together," adds Tricozzi. "One small mat, or even one large mat, will typically not do the job in preventing pathway soiling."

Elimination

Some restaurant managers clean their carpets by having them shampooed or bonnet cleaned or by using dry carpet cleaning systems. The good thing about these systems is that they are relatively easy to use, the equipment necessary is usually not costly, and the carpets dry very fast.

The problem with these systems is that they remove the top-soil at best. "Embedded soil, deep in the carpet fibers, is usually not removed," says Charlie Marinella with U.S. Products, a leading manufacturer of carpet, floorcare, and restorative cleaning equipment. "This is why they are called interim carpet cleaning methods. They may work for a while but not for the long term."

To remove pathway soiling thoroughly requires the use of a hot-water extractor. But not all hot-water extraction systems are the same nor will they produce the same cleaning results. Because carpet cleaning services are often hired to clean restaurant carpets, Marinella suggests that restaurant managers ask the following questions to make sure the service is using the most advanced and effective equipment:

- Does the machine heat the cleaning solution? Just as dishes should not be cleaned in cold water, neither should carpets be cleaned in cold water. Heat improves the effectiveness of the cleaning chemicals so more deep-down soils are removed.
- What is the psi of the machine? Psi refers to the pressure per square inch generated by the machine. A portable unit that delivers 500 psi is much more able to remove embedded pathway soiling than a machine that generates only 150 psi. Additionally, a machine with adjustable psi allows the technician to use one psi setting to clean carpets and, for example, another to safely clean upholstery.
- Does the carpet extractor bear the Carpet and Rug Institute's Seal of Approval label? This seal identifies extractors that pass specific criteria as to soil removal, water or moisture removal, as well as protection of carpet fibers. Even more the machine should have "Gold" certification or better, which signifies the machine best meets these criteria.

One more thing to ask has nothing to do with the hot-water extractor but with the technician. Ask if the technician is IICRC certified. The Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification (IICRC) is a nonprofit organization that provides training and certification of carpet cleaning technicians. Many carpet manufacturers now require that their carpets be cleaned only by an IICRC-certified technician in order to maintain the carpet warranty.

Together with a high performance matting system, the proper carpet care equipment, and a well-trained carpet cleaning technician, soiled pathways in carpets can be one less thing restaurant owners and managers need to be concerned about.

What's a spot and what's a stain?

- A spot is a foreign material attached to the yarns or fibers of a carpet and which can be felt.
- A stain is a color-changing substance on a carpet fiber and cannot be felt.
- Both spots and stains can be referred to as soils.

About the author:

Dawn Shoemaker is a writer for the professional cleaning industry. She may be reached at info@alturasolutions.com

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