

Delivering Power And Performance For Cleaning



Carpets

Our industry is abuzz with Green Cleaning and the use of more environmentally preferable cleaning products, chemicals, tools, and equipment. The benefits of these Green systems, paired with public acknowledgement and support of an industry headed in a healthier direction, are encouraging trends. However, to the “on the street” cleaning professional, two concerns have persisted—the two “p’s,” power and performance ... especially when it comes to carpet extractors.

This is what we have heard working with our distributors and manufacturers’ reps from around the country. They want fast and efficient equipment that will do a satisfactory—if not exceptionally, good job when cleaning carpets. Building service contractors (BSCs) and carpet cleaning contractors say they want machines that make their job easier, more productive, and more profitable as well.

“In many of our larger accounts, especially multi-tenant office buildings, the profit margins for cleaning are quite small,” says Richard Sanchez, owner of AJ Janitorial in Santa Rosa, CA. “It is actually the add-on services, such as carpet cleaning, that make the account profitable. Along with proper worker training, the more power and ‘performance packed’ the machine, the more lucrative the account.”

Sanchez’ comments reflect an oft-repeated message: BSCs and carpet cleaning contractors are forced to do more with

less in an increasingly competitive industry. And, they must do this without sacrificing quality.

“When we clean our customers’ carpets, which is often late in the evening or over the weekends, we need to be able to get in, get the work done well, and move on to the next job,” Sanchez says. “We can only do this with extractors that are powerful, dependable, with more efficient cleaning ability, and are easy to use.”

Different Types of Extractors

Although other methods of maintaining carpet have their role in carpet care, such as using dry absorbents, foam, shampoo or bonnet cleaning, a deep-cleaning is eventually necessary. Most BSCs, carpet cleaning contractors, carpet manufacturers, as well as facility managers will agree that using carpet extractors is the most thorough way to clean carpets. Not only is this an ideal way to clean carpets, it is also healthier because it helps remove contaminants, soils, and residues from fibers, which can mar indoor environ-

BY DAVID STANISLAW

mental quality and the health of building occupants.

Carpet extractors fall into three basic categories: truck mounts, portables, and walk behinds or pull back extractors. Even though each type of machine has its own benefits and features, their effectiveness often depends on facility size, where they are used, and how often.

Truck mounts are by far the most powerful machines on the market. These machines remain stationary during cleaning and are usually housed in a truck or van. Powered by gas motors, they have exceptionally high pressure and water lift and feature hoses that are hundreds of feet long attached to a wand—allowing them to efficiently clean most areas within a residence or small office building. Truck mounts are most often selected by carpet cleaning technicians who clean carpets for a living.

Portable units can vary in style, but the most common is the “box extractor” on wheels that can be transported from room to room. These units usually have 12- to 16-gallon solution and recovery tanks and vacuum motors to lift and remove cleaning solution—and soils—with a pass of the wand. Hose length is usually around 20 feet and some machines have built in heaters to enhance the cleaning solution’s effectiveness. BSCs often prefer portables, as will be discussed later, for a variety of reasons.

Walk behinds or pull back extractors are used in a variety of locations, from small offices to large meeting rooms and long hallways in hotels, convention centers, and other types of facilities.

A walk behind has a transaxle drive that moves forward over carpets. The

machines, vacuum motors, jets, and brushes are in the rear of the unit. Conversely, a pull back extractor, as the name implies, is pulled back over carpets. Vacuum motors, jets, and brushes are located in the front of the machine. Some pull-back units incorporate a “bladder design,” which requires less space, provides a sleeker exterior, and places added contact pressure on the carpet for more efficient cleaning and water recovery.

Often carpet cleaners, using all three types of extractors, now apply a chemical pre-spray to carpets instead of using a cleaning solution in the tank. Less chemical is used this way, minimizing the possibility that residue is left in the carpets after extracting. Chemical residues can potentially be harmful to building occupants if inhaled and may act as a magnet, attracting more soil to the carpet fibers.

A Closer Look At Portable Carpet Extractors

Most BSCs prefer portable carpet extractors over truck mounts because they are less expensive, much more versatile, and fit their needs. They often find that newer portables are powerful enough to provide all the carpet cleaning strength they require. “Because carpet cleaning is an add-on service for us, buying a truck mount unit is not economically feasible for my company,” says Sanchez. “Also, with a truck mount we usually cannot clean above the second floor in a school or office building.”

Additionally, today’s portable extractors have higher psi (pounds per square inch) with multi-stage vacuum systems to more thoroughly penetrate carpet fibers and remove moisture for quicker drying. When selecting a portable carpet extractor, BSCs and carpet cleaning technicians should look for equipment that has

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variable psi pressure. With a variable psi machine, carpets can be cleaned using 100, 200, up to 500 psi. But, that can be adjusted to as low as 50 psi on some portables, which is perfect for cleaning upholstery and more delicate fabrics.

Although an extractor that cleans using cool water can adequately perform in many carpet and upholstery cleaning situations, extractors that can heat cleaning solution to above 200 degrees Fahrenheit can vastly improve cleaning performance. This is because a cleaning chemical's effectiveness improves with heat.

In fact, studies indicate that for every 18 degrees water is heated above 118 degrees, the cleaning chemicals become twice as effective. Additionally, heat expands the carpet fibers, allowing the solution to better penetrate and remove soils. And, hot water speeds drying time more quickly than extractors that use just cool water.

While many portable extractors will heat the solution to approximately 160 degrees, by the time the hot water hits



the carpet fibers it may have substantially cooled. This is why BSCs should select hot water extractors that heat the solution above 200 degrees. This helps make sure the heat is sufficient at the wand tip to most effectively and efficiently clean carpets.

What Else To Look For

Although versatility is one of its best features, portable extractors must also be easy to transport from location to location within a building or to multiple locations. A "dolly-type" design often makes transport much easier. In addition, larger, rubberized wheels and front-mounted swivel castors improve maneuverability and make it easier to transport the machine up and down stairs.

It's best to select portable extractors that have control panels, hose hook-ups, and access to recovery and solution tanks located at the top of the machine. Because carpet cleaning places so much stress on the lower back and shoulders, having these features on top of the machine is less stressful and more ergonomic. Additionally, all switches should be fitted with molded vinyl covers to protect them from moisture.

Some walk behind units have 20-gallon solution and recovery tanks. A larger tank can save time and significantly improve productivity because it permits longer periods of uninterrupted operation before the solution needs to be refilled or rinse water emptied. Additionally, some walk behinds have built-in spray wands that come in handy for spotting and cleaning edges and corners, by applying a little more cleaning solution for extra cleaning power.

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Ask about the machines' vacuum capabilities. This is how much moisture and solution is removed in the cleaning process. Recently one walk-behind extractor was tested by a major carpet manufacturer and found to recover 90 percent of the water applied to the carpet. This speeds drying and helps prevent the possibility that harmful mold and mildew will grow.

A final, and very important consideration, is serviceability. Carpet extractors are complex machines and a glance "under the hood" might surprise some users. Although extractors can last for many years, like any machine with moving parts and complex circuitry, they will need to be periodically serviced.

Extractors should be serviced by trained professionals and the more service friendly the machine, the lower service costs may be. This means the machine should feature motors, pumps, parts, and circuits that are easily accessible. They should also be placed within the machine so that they are protected from other components and parts. It's also a wise idea, when selecting a portable extractor, to ask the distributor how well it holds up compared to other machines.

Carpet Extractors Are Evolving

Low moisture machines that use less water and cleaning solution have already been introduced with more expected in the future. Additionally, battery operated equipment with durable, lasting batteries is helping to free the user from a facility's electric wall outlets, which helps improve productivity. Industry veterans often say that today's extractors, both portable and truck mount, are much more dependable than those made a decade ago. This trend will probably continue, minimizing expensive downtime and repair costs.

Today's extractors are performing at an efficiency level never seen before in this category, and they are doing it quicker and safer. Furthermore, higher performance has not affected power, which has in fact improved. From what we hear from customers, all of these factors are not only satisfying the two "p's," but another "p"—productivity—is also being enhanced.

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