



Spelling Carpet Care with Two *Ps*

By Mike Schaffer

Carpeting has fallen in and out of favor with building managers and owners over the years. During the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, carpet was the flooring of choice and was installed extensively in all types of facilities. Then, during the middle to late 1990s, some reports began to surface that indicated carpeting could have a negative impact on indoor air quality. Many facilities, especially schools, reacted to those reports by removing carpets from their buildings and returning to hard floor coverings.

Since then, new studies have indicated that properly maintained carpets can actually *protect* indoor air quality. This is because carpeting can act like a sponge, trapping contaminants and preventing them from being released into the air. However, the key words here are *properly maintained*. This means carpets must be vacuumed regularly and--depending on location and the amount of foot traffic--deep-cleaned every few months to remove the contaminants.

While carpet can trap contaminants and prevent them from being released into the airstream, care must be taken to prevent this from occurring while vacuuming. The best way to keep soils from becoming airborne is to use vacuums equipped with true HEPA filters. Vacuums with HEPA filters essentially ensure that whatever is being picked up stays within the vacuum collection bag or compartment.

Beyond maintaining carpets using HEPA vacuums, the next step in helping to ensure healthy carpeting and buildings is to establish a regular cleaning schedule, which includes both interim and deep-cleaning methods. Bonnet carpet cleaning was used for years in many facilities as an interim cleaning method, but today most carpet mills either frown upon or recommend against the method, due to the

damage that can be done to the carpet fibers from the rotary action of the bonnet. Today, the most recommended interim method is encapsulation with cylindrical brush machines, which is a method that also serves to protect against contaminants being released into the air.

When it comes to deep cleaning, which is critical to ensuring both protection of the investment made in the carpet and a healthy building environment, the extraction method has proven to be the most effective. However, this method can be time-consuming and expensive, with 80 percent or more of the cost attributed to labor. Thus, any carpet cleaning system that can perform effectively and reduce cleaning times (and therefore labor expenses) will be viewed as welcome news by building owners and managers.

The desire to cut cleaning time is behind the two biggest trends in carpet cleaning equipment today. Those trends are improvements in productivity and performance, which are often referred to as "the two *Ps*." Building owners and managers want equipment that cleans carpets faster--meaning lower cleaning costs--while still delivering on performance. Fortunately, some jansan (janitorial supply and service) manufacturers are listening to what customers want and addressing these challenges.

Productivity

Even before the current recession, customers were looking for carpet cleaning equipment that could improve worker productivity. However, the economic downturn and subsequent tightening of cleaning budgets have made this an even greater concern.

One deep-cleaning carpet technology that has proven effective is self-contained machines that allow for "one-pass" cleaning. These units spray solution under pressure in a controlled manner, agitate the carpet and solution via a cylindrical brush, and then immediately recover the dirty solution through a powerful vacuum system.

Some of the larger self-contained units are also traction-assisted. This means that they have a motor that supplies power to the wheels, making use and transportation very easy, reducing worker fatigue, and improving productivity, especially when used in large facilities.

Performance

Improving worker productivity is important, but unless a machine also performs

well--cleaning carpets thoroughly and ensuring that they are healthy for facility users--it will not address the demands of today's building owners and managers. Thankfully, new technologies have improved equipment performance significantly in the last few years.

One such technology is an internal "bladder" that replaces the use of two tanks. This concept was developed to address a problem with some early self-contained systems: as the cleaning solution was applied, the contact pressure of the machine on the carpet was reduced. This negatively affected the performance of the equipment because the machine could not extract as effectively. Further, when a machine's cleaning solution level ran low, because of the weight shift that occurred between the two tanks, operators sometimes had to make more than one pass over the carpet in order to clean it thoroughly, reducing productivity.

The bladder system in these new machines helps maintain pressure over the brush and vacuum head throughout the entire fill cycle, so that extracting performance remains optimal. This also helps carpets to dry more quickly, minimizing or eliminating possible shrinkage of the carpet or the possibility that mold or mildew might develop due to an overly long drying time.

A Third *P*?

The two *Ps* discussed above--productivity and performance--are machine-focused. However, there is actually a third *P* that should be mentioned: planning. Planning involves developing a carpet care plan that will keep carpets clean and healthy on an ongoing basis. All too often, carpets are cleaned only when they become noticeably soiled. The goal of a carpet care plan is to minimize soiling or even prevent it from occurring in the first place.

How does such a plan work? It involves three things: proper vacuuming; interim cleaning, which also includes spot removal; and deep-cleaning carpet extraction, all occurring on a set schedule. In most office settings, carpets should be vacuumed after each workday. Also, spots should be removed as soon as they are noticed. The reason for this is very simple: the longer stains are allowed to set on a carpet, the more difficult they can be to remove. Both an interim cleaning method, such as encapsulation, and a deep-cleaning carpet extraction schedule should be established.

Finally, many facilities have a tendency to put greater carpet cleaning emphasis on the executive or public areas of a facility. However, doing a good job of cleaning and maintaining carpets in the less-prestigious areas of a facility keeps

soils from traveling from one area to another, helping all carpeted areas to stay cleaner longer.

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