

Proper methods for cleaning auto upholstery

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Detailer's Spotlight

Or: What to do when a bear takes up residency in your customer's car

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Visitors to Los Angeles often find it hard to imagine, but bears, wolves, and other wild animals also call L.A. home. They are frequently found in the hills above many residential areas.

For one homeowner in West L.A., bear sightings were not unusual — having one lounge in the backseat of her convertible, however, was a bit odd.

This owner stored granola bars in her vehicle. One warm day with the car parked in the driveway, the scent of the snacks apparently caught the attention of a nearby bear, and it jumped into the back of the convertible, helped himself to the granola bars, and then decided to make himself comfortable.

Although no one knows exactly how long the bear was in the car, by the time he was discovered and he hastily took off for the hills, he had left a nasty, rancid odor in the car's upholstery. Home upholstery cleaning remedies and odor cover-ups proved to be of no use. The car owner soon discovered she had one option left: Take the car to an auto detailer well-versed in upholstery cleaning.

Auto upholstery 101

Leather and vinyl upholstery are in many ways easier to clean and maintain than fabric upholstery. Washing leather or vinyl with an appropriate cleaner usually removes odor causing bacteria along with any stains. Although leather and vinyl are porous, they are far less porous than the fabrics used in automobiles, meaning the bacteria and contaminants causing the odor and stains usually remain on the surface, allowing them to be washed away.

The fabrics used in most automobiles are different from the fabrics used for home upholstered furniture. Fabrics selected for cars are designed to withstand heat, cold, humidity, and most important, the sun's ultraviolet rays. They are also designed to hold their colors much longer than home upholstery because they are solution dyed with higher pressure and using stronger grades of chemicals and dyes. Further, the fabrics are selected first for durability. Most auto manufacturers want to know how durable a fabric is before considering it for their product lines.

We should also note that just as home upholstery styles change, so do they change in car upholsteries. For auto detailers, however, the big concern is not the colors or patterns, but the type of fabric installed.

For instance, for many years velour seat coverings were very popular. Velour is a type of velvet and as such can be somewhat fragile. Initially, caring and cleaning velour seat coverings could prove difficult. However, and fortunately for car owners and auto detailers, over time velour has become more durable. And what might be even more fortunate for cleaning professionals, it is not used as much today as it once was.

Wet cleaning

Instead of velour, fabrics made of nylon, polyester, and olefin fibers, or a combination of all three, are the preferred fabric choices for cars, boats, and other types of vehicles that auto detailers may be called on to clean. These are synthetic fibers that have proven to be durable, stain resistant, cost effective, and, with proper know-how and equipment, relatively easy to clean.

The most effective way to clean nylon, polyester, and olefin is by “wet cleaning” using a hot-water carpet extractor.

The type of extractor used and its versatility can play a crucial role in how well the upholstered item is cleaned.

For instance, a system that generates approximately 200 degrees Fahrenheit heat will help improve the effectiveness of the cleaning chemicals. Not only will the seat coverings look better, but they often dry faster and less chemical may be necessary, making the entire cleaning process healthier for the cleaning professional and more environmentally responsible.

An extractor with adjustable psi (pressure per square inch) is also recommended. Cleaning more delicate or older fabrics, such as velour, may require a lower psi so as not to damage the fibers.

As to the upholstery equipment selected, there are now several effective tools available. However, for ergonomic reasons, technicians should look for an upholstery tool that is light and cool to the touch. Some systems are now even triggerless. This can make a big difference when cleaning upholstery because having no trigger valve allows the technician to use the tool in multiple positions.

Final thoughts

It is not every day that auto detailers are asked to clean car upholstery because a bear has made the backseat his home. And it's true, for many auto detailers, upholstery and carpet cleaning is often a minor part of their service program. However, for those detailers who plan to offer more extensive upholstery cleaning and need to know how to handle just about any type of soiling, it is advisable to take advantage of the training and educational programs offered by such organizations as the nonprofit Institute of Inspection, Cleaning, and Restoration Certification (IICRC).

Upholstery and carpet cleaning are science-based procedures. Understanding the science ensures that your customers' auto upholstery and carpets are cleaned properly, effectively, and safely, however the problems arose.

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