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Watch Your Step

*Looking for an untapped profit center for your business?
Investigate this easy add-on service.*

By Dennis Russel

One of the difficulties some carpet cleaners experience is that, in many communities, there are a lot of other companies chasing the same customers.

This can make it very tough to set yourself and your company apart from your competitors.

It can also be a very confusing problem for the customer. Unless they have been referred to a specific company, they often make the mistake of selecting a carpet cleaner based solely on their price.

There are really only two ways to handle this challenge: The first is to market, market, market, and, even more important, fine-tune your marketing skills. The second is to offer a service that many, if not most, of your competitors do not offer.

The marketing topic is another issue altogether. As for offering another service, it might be worth your attention to consider a little known but a very in-demand service: Escalator cleaning.

Start noticing how often you encounter escalators:

- Many big-box retailers have escalators so customers can get up and down floors quickly and safely.
- In large shopping centers, escalators are the most common way to get from one level to another.
- Airports and train stations have them all over their facilities.
- They are a common feature in hotels, office buildings and hospitals.

The type of cleaning we are discussing isn't about the handrails and sides of the escalator, although that certainly can be included in the service. In most cases, in-house or contract cleaners take care of this. Our focus is on *the steps*.

Escalator statistics

- Escalators move at about one-two feet per second.
- The typical inclination is about 30 degrees.
- Modern escalators have metal steps that move on a system of tracks.
- Parallel escalators move up and down. Multiple parallel are two escalators, side-by-side, moving in the same or opposite direction. Crisscross escalators are stacked on top of each in one direction in order to save space.
- The number of people an escalator can carry varies, but it must be designed to meet peak traffic demands even if that is for only brief periods of time.

Taking a beating

The steps on escalators can take a real beating, especially in a busy location.

They typically are cleated — the treads that give them the ribbed appearance — which become a magnet for dirt, grit, soils, grease, food and spills. As the soil collects, it is pushed down, deeper and deeper into the cleated areas.

Several problems arise when this occurs, such as:

- Slippery steps: The reason the steps on an escalator typically are cleated is to help stabilize foot contact and prevent slipping or falls. However, as the treads become filled with soil, they lose this ability and can even become slick.
- Loss of luster: As the soil accumulates in the ribs

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of the step, the soil can dent and ding the metal/aluminum steps, causing them to lose their luster. If it goes too far, one of the few options available to the building owner is to replace the damaged steps.

- Mechanical problems: Escalators are complicated pieces of machinery. And just like all other equipment and machines, they tend to function best when kept clean.
- Overall appearance: When users of a facility ride an escalator, the first thing they do is look down to catch the next step. Imagine, if you will, that step is soiled, dirty, with grit pressed down into treads. It can say a lot about the overall appearance and upkeep of that facility.

Ways to keep them clean

One of the oldest and most common ways to clean escalators is dismantling the stairs and pressure washing them. This can be done at the location, or some companies that specialize in escalator cleaning may remove the steps and have them cleaned at their shop.

Although pressure washing is a service offered by many carpet cleaning technicians, dismantling an escalator is not. You are best to leave this to companies that specialize in this type of service.

However, there are issues with this conventional way of cleaning escalators, mostly for the customer. The key ones are:

- Cost: The number of steps on an escalator can vary considerably from about 20 to 70 or more. Removing each step and then replacing it is very time and labor consuming.
- Out of service: The escalator is out of service when this type of cleaning is performed and this can last several hours, even days.

A simple diversification

In recent years, a much simpler, hands-free approach to escalator cleaning has emerged and this is where carpet cleaners come in. There is no removal of steps.

One technician can typically handle the task, and, once started, the machine can clean the steps on its own. Further, the



A dirty escalator is an eyesore and, like any other hard floor surface, must be cleaned on a regular basis. Escalators are everywhere. Cleaning them can be a very lucrative add-on service.

equipment is comparable in price to a small portable extractor, making it relatively inexpensive.

Referred to as automatic cleaning systems, they operate unattended after initially set up. With the escalator turned off, the system is positioned at one end so that the stairs are moving away from the machine. The machine's cleaning head is lowered onto the escalator and the escalator is activated.

Some systems have a built-in vacuum system to collect dirt and debris on the steps, which is the first step in the cleaning process. However, most machines have attached brushes that loosen and remove soils embedded in the treads, as well as separate pads to polish the top of the steps.

In most cases, the brushes and polishing pads are available in various levels of stiffness and grit, so that different styles of escalators can be cleaned.

Return visits

Usually, the first cleaning is longer than future cleaning. Much depends on the degree of soiling on the escalator's steps. Future cleanings should take less time if the customer sets up a regular cleaning schedule, and this can be an added bonus for carpet cleaning technicians offering this service.

In some cases, escalators should be cleaned at least once a month, even more often if there is heavy foot traffic. Since the cleaning process using an automatic escalator cleaning system requires minimal time and labor — essentially just setting up the machine — the service can be a gravy train.

The key is to set up some type of regular cleaning schedule with the client, either by contract or agreement. Their steps are kept cleaner, their facility looks better and you have a repeat customer. *CF*