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SOA Program A Reliable Tool For The Health Care Cleaning Industry

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by by Robert Kravitz

About 15 years ago, a major manufacturer of trash can liners for both the home and professional markets began labeling some of their products as "environmentally safe." The labeling went on to indicate that the products were so safe that the bags would "degrade into harmless organic powder" in a relatively short time after disposal.

However, later testing by independent laboratories revealed that the bags were not environmentally safe because the "harmless" powder advertised and promoted actually degrades into ingredients that are harmful to living things and the environment. Whether the claims were based on the best available information at the time or simply "self-declared" by the manufacturer to use as a marketing tool was not revealed.

This caused considerable confusion and frustration for many consumers, including health care facilities, who thought they were doing the right thing for the environment by selecting the trash liners and even paying more for them. This is just one example of many that convinced advocates of the use of Greener products, as well as the need for some type of certification process honored by all parties.


The past 10 years have seen the evolution of two certification organizations that have helped clarify the question of Green. EcoLogo and Green Seal are now widely respected, independent, third-party organizations that have developed stringent criteria to determine if products related to cleaning, building, paper, ink, and scores of other industries are Green. This is good news for health care facility managers who can now eliminate doing the homework of determining what is and is not an environmentally responsible product.

And now facility managers have another certification process to help determine which extractors to select for cleaning carpets. Ending the guessing game of trying to

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choose the most effective and efficient machines, the Carpet and Rug Institute's Seal of Approval (SOA) program has proved to be one of the most successful and reliable certification programs developed for the professional cleaning industry.

XRF

“The SOA program is based on x-ray fluorescence analyzer technology, or XRF,” said Steve Williams, senior head of Research and Development for US Products, manufacturers of professional floor, carpet, and restoration equipment. “Developed for NASA to examine space shuttle components and look for impurities that could cause premature wear, the technology can also precisely identify the soils and impurities found in carpet fibers.”

According to Williams, not only can XRF determine what and how many soils are in carpet fibers, it can also detect the amount of moisture left in carpets after extraction.

The testing procedure is quite simple. Working with a sample piece of carpet, an XRF machine first assesses the amount and content of soil in the carpet. Then, after the carpet has been cleaned with an extractor, the soil content is gauged a second time. This before-and-after testing process measures the extractor's cleaning effectiveness and performance, and how much moisture has been removed after extraction – an important consideration because excessive amounts of moisture left in carpet fibers can result in the growth of mold and mildew that can harm occupant health and indoor air quality.

Along with measuring soil and moisture removal, the testing procedure ensures the extraction process has not harmed the carpet pile.

The Bronze, Silver, and Gold

Unlike the pass/fail certification criteria established by EcoLogo, Green Seal, and similar organizations, extractors that pass the SOA certification may win one of three awards: Bronze, Silver, or Gold. “Extractors that exceed average soil-removal standards receive a Bronze rating,” Williams said. “Those achieving higher soil/moisture-removal ratings receive a Silver rating, and those receiving the highest level of measurable soil and moisture removal are awarded a Gold-level SOA.”

Williams suggests that medical facility managers consider purchasing Gold-rated machines because of their greater concerns about germs, bacteria, and microorganisms on all surfaces, including carpets, as well as their greater need to protect indoor air quality. He said that some machines that were originally classified as Bronze have now been upgraded to Gold with the introduction of a new type of wand. “This wand

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is totally reengineered and has removed the airflow turbulence found in most wands," Williams said.

The Real winners

According to Williams, when the SOA program was first introduced, only five truck-mount extractors and just one manufacturer of portable carpet extractors won certification. Today, several more manufacturers of carpet extractors have won certification, and many more are working to improve their machines so that they will also win an SOA ranking.

Ultimately, the real winners are the end customers, who will enjoy such benefits as these:

- **Validation.** If an extractor earned SOA standing, facility managers know it has been third-party tested and met stringent guidelines and standards established by the Carpet and Rug Institute.
- **Health.** SOA carpet extractors effectively remove more contaminants as well as moisture from carpets. Carpets are healthier and dry faster, helping to protect indoor environmental quality.
- **Cost savings.** Using more efficient equipment helps improve worker productivity and reduce carpet cleaning frequencies. Additionally, less chemical may be needed, which not only is a cost savings but also reduces cleaning's impact on the environment.

As referenced earlier, the Green-certification programs, as well as SOA, are having another impact on the cleaning industry. They are pushing the industry to develop new equipment and technologies to improve the effectiveness of cleaning.

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