

Low-Moisture Cleaning: Time to Re-think Carpet Maintenance?

By **Mark Warner**

We all know that the type of carpet, the type and amount of soil, and the environment that the carpet exists in should dictate which carpet cleaning method to use. These variables will influence the type of carpet cleaning tools the professional will utilize.

There are many ways to categorize carpet cleaning operations, but perhaps the simplest way is to identify whether the carpet needs restorative cleaning or routine cleaning. This means that the carpets are either loaded with soils, spots and stains and require restorative and aggressive cleaning, or else they are being routinely maintained and the carpet cleaning operation is hired to help better manage the carpet's appearance and eliminate the development of traffic lanes, stubborn spots and stains.

Although many carpet cleaning methods can be aggressively used to provide restorative cleaning, hot water extraction is often sought when the carpet appears extremely soiled. Many people assume that hot water extraction is the only way to restore carpets, but there are others. The advent of new "encapsulation" chemistries has greatly expanded

the restorative capabilities of many low-moisture systems.

Encapsulation chemistries can include dry absorbent media systems as well as liquid systems that utilize a polymer content which bonds to the soil and either crystallizes and encapsulates the soil, or dehydrates the soil into a dry particulate. And while these formulations facilitate soil removal during the cleaning operation, they also will continue the cleaning process well after the actual cleaning procedure has been completed.

Any solution or material left behind will continue to encapsulate the soil during the dehydration (drying) process. In fact, many liquid systems will dehydrate into very minute particles, remaining almost invisible to the naked eye, and are vacuumed away during routine cleaning later. There are many different kinds of liquid encapsulation formulas, and each using very different technology (something to discuss in detail at a later date.)

Carpet Cleaning Frequency

Unfortunately, many facility managers and homeowners wait far too long before they attempt to clean their carpets.



In these cases, a restorative and aggressive approach is the norm, but it doesn't need to be that way. Sometimes the best approach may be to incorporate multiple systems in the carpet maintenance program. This involves the use of routine "interim" low-moisture carpet cleaning systems followed by periodic extraction.

Hard Surfaces vs. Carpet

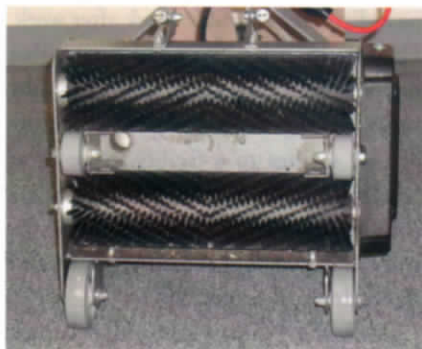
Interestingly enough, the multi-system approach is pretty easy to understand when we compare it to the way people traditionally maintain hard floors. Hard



- 1 Many variables direct your choice of method
- 2 You don't need to be restricted to one approach
- 3 Everyone benefits from better-looking carpets



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floors and VCT are not stripped and refinished every time their appearance starts to deteriorate. Other hard-floor maintenance procedures are used to keep the floor's appearance at high levels, including damp mopping or auto-scrubbing, spray buffing or burnishing, as well as top scrubbing and recoating.

These procedures lessen the time and cost of maintaining hard floors, while enhancing their appearance. Carpet maintenance can be approached the same way, with the same benefits.

Damp Mopping or Auto-Scrubbing?

Effective vacuuming can easily equate to the damp mopping or auto-scrubbing operation on hard floors, and should be performed just as often. Obviously, the appearance level of hard floors will start to deteriorate if no other maintenance operations are used, leading to premature finish damage, and requiring a complete stripping operation to correct.

That is not how we maintain hard floors but, unfortunately, many people do just that with their carpets. They vacuum them routinely, then, when they start to appear slightly soiled, they bring in the extractors.

Taking a Closer Look

"Interim" maintenance procedures are used in maintaining hard floors (e.g. stripping, spray buffing/burnishing and top scrub and recoating). These procedures are used to lengthen the cycle



time between stripping and refinishing operations, lowering maintenance costs, while providing a beautiful appearance.

We can (and should) approach carpeting in the same way. Carpet extraction cycles can be lengthened much like stripping cycles have been lengthened, while interim methods are implemented to keep the floor's appearance level high.

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Stripping and Refinishing

Carpet extraction could easily equate to the “stripping” operation of a hard floor, with the result being a complete flushing of the carpet, right down to the backing. The negative component is the length of time the cleaning operation takes, especially when you include the length of time it takes for the carpets to return to their normal state of dryness.

On the other hand, low-moisture systems *can* be perceived as being much faster because they focus on the visibly soiled carpet areas and the carpets dry much faster; in some cases carpets can be cleaned and put back into service immediately, with no down-time.

Spray Buffing/Burnishing

Spray buffing is used on hard floors to remove heel marks and damage, and return the floor to a glossy appearance. Bonnet systems can do something very similar to carpets. They impact the top one-third of the carpet fiber, effectively dealing with highly visible soils. Carpets soil from top down, so if we deal with this area of the carpet routinely, it will take much longer for soil to have the ability to build-up on the lower levels of the carpet fiber as well as the backing.

With the advent of new microfiber technology, the effectiveness of modern bonnet systems has been greatly enhanced, while the fear of damage has been practically eliminated, especially when used by a properly trained and skilled operator. In this case the bonnetting operation equates to the “spray buffing/burnishing” operation used on hard floors. It will immediately impact the

carpet’s appearance, and will continue to do so each time it’s performed, until the carpet’s soil load becomes too great.

Eventually the carpet may appear to stop responding to the bonnet cleaning operation in the same way that hard floors tend to stop responding to spray buffing or burnishing over time.

Top Scrub and Recoat

At this point, another low-moisture system can be utilized on carpets. Machines with soft nylon brushes (rotary or cylindrical) can reach deeper down the shaft of the carpet fiber, facilitating the removal of soil from the top 2/3 of the carpet fiber. Encapsulation chemicals and materials play a big role in this form of cleaning, since the brushes themselves aren’t collecting the soil. A subsequent vacuuming operation actually collects the soils.

This operation equates to the “top scrub and recoating” procedure used on hard floors, which is done when hard floors appear to stop responding to spray buffing or burnishing. After performing this low-moisture brush operation on the carpet, the carpet’s soil load will have been effectively reduced so that the carpet will again respond to routine bonnet cleaning.

Stripping and Refinishing

When a hard floor stops responding to interim maintenance procedures, or has developed severe finish damage, the floor is stripped and refinished. When the carpet stops responding to the interim cleaning systems, it may be the perfect time to perform an extraction operation.

Of course, the extraction operation will clean the entire length of the carpet fiber, as well as flushing out any soils that have begun to accumulate just above the carpet backing. Portable and truck-mounted extraction systems are ideal for this.

This multi-system methodology elevates the on-going appearance level of the carpet. This is especially critical in highly visible, highly political areas. Carpets should never be allowed to ap-

pear dirty day after day, week after week. Hard floors aren’t. The good news is that this aggressive approach to maintaining clean looking carpets can also be a form of cost savings to a facility, since these “interim” cleaning procedures can be accomplished in less time, and focus on the truly soiled parts of the carpet instead of the entire surface area.

The bottom line is that we all benefit from better-looking carpets, including manufacturers and cleaning system manufacturers, as well as the facility managers and the carpet-cleaning technicians. In fact, the entire industry benefits.



Low-Moisture Carpet Cleaning Systems

There are dozens and dozens of low-moisture systems available now. The options for interim low-moisture systems are quite vast. They include traditional systems like rotary bonnets, dry absorbent media systems, and dry foam shampooing, which have all been around for years. Other recent advances include cylindrical brushes and bonnets, rotary pads and bonnets, steam vapor systems with absorbent pads, oscillating bonnet machines, etc. On top of all that, there is equipment that incorporates unique variations of all these systems.

The LMCCA has been an important stage for many of these systems to come to light and receive visibility and acceptance. It is one of the most important roles the association plays, and it’s a great place to start if you want more information on *all* the tools available for your trade! ○