

Keep it clean!

*Rental furniture in
top condition helps make
your business sparkle*

The upholstery cleaning process that a rent-to-own company chooses can have a big impact on improving furniture appearance, extending service life, increasing client satisfaction and decreasing returns. The look and condition of furniture can also affect the rental rate and a client's desire to rent or purchase the piece. Delivering cleaner furnishings may even improve the chances that clients will take better care of the items.



By Greg Yearsley

Not only is it important to use a cleaning program that provides good results, it also makes sense to select a process that fits staffing and budget resources. It's of little value to use cleaning methods that are labor-intensive, do not provide reliable service or cost too much. There are three basic options for cleaning and maintaining rental furniture: Hiring contract services, using spot remover products and maintaining on-site equipment. Let's take a look at these processes and review the advantages and disadvantages of each.

OUTSIDE SERVICE CONTRACTORS

Overview: Some RTO businesses use outside service professionals for cleaning and spot removal. Factoring in the expense of outsourcing cleaning jobs against the benefit of saving internal resources is an economic decision that each business needs to evaluate for its specific circumstances.

"Because it's so expensive, we try our best to get furniture clean with our own system before calling in the pros," says Larry Randolph of Customer's Choice in east Texas. "But, it's worth it to spend \$100 or more if a piece of fur-

niture is available for an appointment when you need them the most. If soiled furniture sits idle waiting to be cleaned, it's not generating any revenue. Plus, it takes up valuable storage space either in the store or the warehouse."

SPRAY-ON SPOTTERS

Overview: Some rental companies invest very little in furniture cleaning and rely on mass-market spot removers for emergency upholstery cleaning. While these over-the-counter products usually cost only a few dollars

and are also designed to use on smaller spots, so larger areas require extensive time and labor. In addition, it may take multiple cans or bottles to clean one piece of furniture, so cost-per-use can be relatively high.

ON-SITE EQUIPMENT

Overview: For most RTO businesses, investing in on-site equipment saves money and can provide added flexibility in getting furniture back into service fast. Depending on the size of the rental operation and how much space is devoted to home furnishings, cleaning may take place at the store level or in a central warehouse. When deciding to purchase or upgrade equipment, there are several different types of equipment to consider, many of which are described below.

DRY EXTRACTION SYSTEMS

Overview: Dry cleaning systems generally use low-moisture foam or gel compounds that bond to dirt and dry quickly to a powdery substance.

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Advantages: The most direct benefit of using an outside service company is that it requires no labor from on-site staff. Some people also believe that service contractors have a degree of training and equipment technology that allows them to achieve better cleaning results than RTO staff.

Disadvantages: The expense of outsourcing may be hard to justify, especially in a tight economy. Plus, to reduce billing expenses, there may be a tendency to let moderately dirty furniture go back into service without the benefits of cleaning. In addition, contractors may not be scheduled for a service call or be

available for an appointment when you need them the most. If soiled furniture sits idle waiting to be cleaned, it's not generating any revenue. Plus, it takes up valuable storage space either in the store or the warehouse."

Advantages: Small package sizes are ready-to-use and require little storage space. Most products spray on and blot off, which requires no equipment or training.

Disadvantages: Household spot removers usually have problems taking out the toughest stains and are known to leave residues that promote resoiling. These prod-



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Advantages: Because there is very little water used, the biggest benefit of dry extraction systems is fast drying.

Disadvantages: Dry compounds tend to sit on the surface and provide little penetration. They also require a thorough extraction vacuuming to remove the dried powder.

HOME SHAMPOO UNITS

Overview: Much of this home care equipment is designed for use on carpet and upholstery and is available in an almost endless array of choices. Decision points include price, power, capacity and performance. While these units may be inexpensive to purchase, they may not always provide satisfactory results.

Ed Spuzello of Furniture Source in Des Moines, IA, reports only moderate success with a home unit. "We use a small home machine. With that machine, the stains basically lighten, but they don't really come out. If they're too bad, we have to rent the furniture as is or sell it off," he says.

Advantages: Equipment designed for the home market is relatively inexpensive, lightweight and easy to use.

Disadvantages: These units provide little cleaning power and marginal deep cleaning ability. Most use a high-suds shampoo, which creates a foam mess and leaves a residue that promotes re-soiling. Some units have a rotary brush that can flatten and mat fabric.

STEAM CLEANERS

Overview: Steam equipment has been used for a variety of cleaning applications for decades. While vapor steam cleaning—with temperatures above 200 degrees F—is still used for some carpet and upholstery jobs, this process is largely being phased out and replaced by hot water extraction processes.

Advantages: Steam effectively emulsifies and suspends a wide range of deep-down oily and non-oily dirt.

Disadvantages: Steam creates excessive moisture and heat that can damage fabric, dull color and strip off stain-resistance compounds. Plus, as a safety concern, steam vapor can burn skin.

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Guide to spot and stain removal

Upholstery stains can come from anywhere: a spilled drink, a dropped sandwich, a greasy head—you name it. Successfully removing these stains leaves RTO furniture looking like new and ready to draw top dollar. When fabric stains remain, the piece looks worn-out and much of the value is lost. Here are some quick cleaning application tips when attempting to clean upholstery:

- **Remove dry and loose material before cleaning.** Vacuum up, scrape off or wipe away any loose matter so it does not have a chance to liquefy and add to the cleaning problem.
- **Test an inconspicuous place.** Even though rental furniture is usually chosen for durability and colorfast fabrics, it is a good idea to test cleaners on a small area before doing the complete job. Also be prepared to clean the whole piece, because cleaning a small area may create a noticeable contrast.
- **Blot—don't rub.** Not only can aggressive rubbing damage fabric weave, it can also spread the stain. That's why gentle but firm blotting is usually the best method for removing stains. Work the stain from the outside edge inward to reduce the possibility of leaving a ring or spreading the staining material. Also be sure to use a clean, white cloth so as not to transfer spots or dye to the furniture.
- **Don't saturate surfaces.** Water can be readily absorbed into the foam padding used in many types of upholstered furniture. Not only does water absorption leave the surface feeling wet, it can also draw staining material hidden in the pad back through the fabric. This process is called "wicking" and can leave a brownish-yellow spot.
- **Increase contact time.** For tough stains, it may be necessary to pre-treat the area and allow the cleaner to work for a minute or more before cleaning. Again, take care not to overwet the surface.
- **Try another cleaning formulation.** Not all cleaners are designed to take out all types of stains. For instance, if you're using a cleaner formulated to remove water-based materials and your stain doesn't budge, try using a product designed for oil-based stains. Product labels should provide information as to the types of stains that they remove.
- **Use cleaners and processes that don't leave residue.** While there are certainly parts of furniture prone to soiling (the arms of chairs, for example), one reason the same area keeps getting dirty is because some cleaners leave behind an oily film or a light powder that quickly attracts new dirt.
- **Sorry, some stains are set.** If you've worked on a stain without much success, it may be permanent. Things such as red soda or yellow mustard actually dye the fabric color and there is little that can be done to remove them. Sometimes working too vigorously on these spots can do more harm than good and it may be best just to remove as much as possible and leave the rest alone.

HOT WATER EXTRACTION EQUIPMENT

Overview: To extend service life and brighten appearance, most fabric manufacturers recommend an annual deep cleaning with hot-water-extraction equipment. There are many hot-water-extraction systems on the market and it's important to get one that is durable and easy for employees to use.

"We use an extraction system now that has solved all of the service and training issues of other equipment we used in the past," says Bill Sebastian, field communications manager at Aaron Rents. "We're delighted with the performance. It's easy for our staff to use."

Some extractors can also clean large carpeted areas so they can be used to maintain the store showroom.

"We used to rent extractors at the grocery store, but we decided to buy the equipment so we can clean and turn inventory more often," says Les Pearsey, of Pearsey Rentals in Bakersfield, CA. "One other benefit to the extractor machine we use is that it also cleans our store carpet."

Advantages: If the right extraction system is chosen, the equipment should provide outstanding cleaning performance with little need for maintenance or staff training. Extraction equipment is also known for delivering

The best method?

Contract services, spot removing products and on-site equipment are the three primary ways to clean rental furniture between leasing contracts. There are several factors to balance when choosing which process will provide the most benefits.

CLEANING METHOD	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Contract services	Requires no staff labor. May have expertise to remove tough stains.	Costly. May not be available when you need them.
Spot-removing products	Readily available. Small packaging.	Labor-intensive for larger areas. Limited cleaning power.
On-site cleaning equipment	Professional quality results. Can clean furniture anytime.	Figuring out which cleaning system to buy. Some machines require training to operate.

impressive deep-cleaning results. In addition, portable extractors are easy to transport and can provide commercial-size tank capacities (more than 2 gallons) that minimize refill frequency.

Disadvantages: Some systems can be complex and awkward to operate, which

may require staff training. If improperly used, extractors can also deliver too much water for some types of upholstery. It's wise to select a system where flow rate can be easily controlled and use compounds such as foaming cleaners that minimize water absorption.

Bubble away the trouble

Cleaners that foam provide many benefits for upholstery cleaning. Foam not only suspends and removes dirt, it also makes the cleaning process drier by reducing the amount of moisture that penetrates into fabric and padding. In addition, foam provides excellent vertical surface cling, which is a big help when cleaning sofa and chair backs. When using foaming upholstery cleaners with an extraction machine, it's a good idea to use a bit of anti-foam additive in the recovery tank to control suds build-up.

Other products used for fabric cleaning include compounds that dry to a powder and cleaners with petroleum ingredients. While powders can effectively suspend and clean away many types of surface soil, they usually do not penetrate deeply into fabric and require an additional step to vacuum away the residue. The benefit of petroleum-based products is that they work well to break down greases and oils, but they usually leave a sticky film that quickly attracts more dirt.

While there are many ways to clean and restore RTO furniture, good maintenance procedures extend furniture life, increase customer satisfaction and boost revenues. Choosing the best method not only increases profitability, it can also minimize the time and effort spent on operating the equipment. ■

Greg Yearsley is the commercial marketing manager for Rug Doctor Pro (www.rugdoctorpro.com). The company specializes in portable commercial cleaning systems, including an extraction process for brightening and restoring upholstered furniture that has been successful in RTO centers nationwide. Yearsley can be reached at 972/673-1466.