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February 06, 2014

Getting the Most Out of Wet/Dry Vacuums

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Using a wet/dry vacuum is typically the most effective and quickest way to remove moisture and soils from the floor. This helps dry the floor and speed up the floor stripping and refinishing process, which can be a very labor-intensive cleaning task.

Many cleaning professionals only use wet/dry vacuums for floor care. Not to mention, wet/dry vacs are often packed way back in the truck somewhere or in some storage room, rarely seeing the light of day. In fact, many cleaning professionals do not even own a wet/dry vacuum system. However, for those that do and actually put these machines to use, they invariably become a workhorse, used so frequently that cleaning professionals often wonder how they ever got by without one.

Before we start exploring how these machines work, we should clarify a few things. First, wet/dry vacs often go by different names, such as "jumbo vacs," "tank vacuums," "industrial vacuums," among others. No matter what the name, the thing that distinguishes these vacuums from upright vacuum cleaners or backpacks is that they typically can be used to vacuum up both dry and wet materials, often simultaneously. Further, we are not referring to the wet/dry vacuum units available in retail or even hardware stores. While these systems may work well in a residential setting for small jobs, for regular use on a work site—commercial or residential—you need a professional wet/dry vacuum system typically sold through a jan/san distributor.

Trash Cans on Wheels

For those who know and appreciate these machines, you have probably at one time or another heard them referred to as "trash cans on wheels." Because, truth be told, that is exactly what some of the larger, more industrial systems look like: a large drum with a motor on top, along with filters anchored or resting on a four-wheeled dolly. Smaller tank vacuums tend to resemble an upright carpet extractor and are about the same size.

According to Doug Berjer, product manager for Tornado Industries, cleaning professionals most often select the smaller units, unless they are involved in industrial cleaning or new-construction cleanup. Some of these smaller tank vacuums have either a polyethylene or stainless steel body and come in sizes from 10 to 20 gallons. However, going with a larger system has its advantages.

"These machines [wet/dry vacs] often prove more valuable and are used more often than originally intended," adds Berjer. "So it is a good idea to select a system larger than you think you may need. That way, the machine can 'grow as you grow' and be put to use in more demanding situations should they come up."

To be effective, tank vacuums should have a 1.6 horsepower motor, generating approximately 114 cfm (airflow) and 90 inches of water lift. The terms "airflow" and "water lift" warrant some explanation. Airflow is generally defined as the movement of air from one location to another, says cleaning expert Allen Rathey, president of InstructionLink/JanTrain Inc. and Healthy Facilities Institute. Airflow can also be defined as the amount or volume of air moving through the vacuum. This is typically measured in cubic feet per minute (cfm) and is an indication of the amount of soil that can be carried into the vacuum cleaner.

Water lift, on the other hand, is a measurement in inches of a vacuum cleaner's strength. This lift is measured in "inches of water lift," or simply "water lift." To understand how this works, picture a clear tube being placed in a container of water. The tube is attached to a vacuum cleaner hose at the top.

"When the machine is turned on, the water rises in the tube. How high it rises helps determine the water lift of the machine," says Berjer. "In most cases, the higher the CFM and water lift, the more effective the vacuum system."

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One other term that is often mentioned when discussing tank vacuums is psi, or pounds per square inch. Related to the above terms, psi refers to the power the machine has to actually pull soil, debris, and moisture off a floor or other surface.

In addition

Beyond their use with refinishing floors, wet/dry vacuum systems have many other valuable uses in commercial cleaning. Richard Sanchez, owner of AJ Cleaning, a 20-year-old cleaning company in Northern California, has put his tank vacuum cleaners to use in the following ways:

- Cleaning up a job site after renovation and new construction
- Removing moisture from floors and carpets (typically in an emergency situation)
- Emptying water from a sump pump (or wherever excess water/moisture has accumulated)
- Unclogging sink and floor drains
- Removing dust, packaging debris, wood-related debris, and metal shavings in an industrial warehouse
- Vacuuming up debris under stoves and refrigerators in commercial kitchens
- Cleaning air vents
- Vacuuming up debris (wet and dry) in outdoor walkways
- Cleaning trash and dumpster areas
- Vacuuming up snow from steps and walkways

"For a tool that many [cleaning professionals] just put in the back of the truck and forget, we seem to have one out and working just about everywhere we go," says Sanchez. "We have also found them to be particularly helpful in cleaning kindergarten and elementary schools, because they can vacuum up debris that often get missed when dust mopping."

When selecting a Tank Vacuum

When it comes to selecting a wet/dry vacuum, contractors should do their homework and be a bit more selective, according to Berjer. Outside of simply selecting a machine that has enough power to handle your cleaning tasks, Berjer says to look for several other features in a tank vacuum, including:

- A complete set of attachments, including hose, wand, carpet tool, squeegee, crevice, and dusting tools
- A swivel hose connector that allows 60-degree hose rotation. This speeds worker productivity and eliminates concerns about disconnecting the hose from the machine.
- A sound-insulated head. "Some wet/drys can be very noisy, and this can minimize where and how they are used and prove bothersome to the user."
- An effective dust collection system to protect indoor air quality
- A washable filter that allows for re-use
- At least 10 feet of power hose so the system can be used in remote areas
- A tilt-and-pour tank. "While this is not found on all tank vacuums, it makes emptying solution much easier and less stressful."
- Lots of stability. "[When selecting a machine] give the hose a jerk or two to see if the machine stays stable. You want a machine that can be your cleaning partner and go where you go no matter what the terrain."
- A size that's right for your jobs. "There are much larger 'jumbo' vacuums with 55-gallon tanks [that are] also manufactured," adds Berjer. "But these are for really heavy industrial cleaning and best suited for contractors that do industrial cleaning or lots of construction cleanup."

Other uses

Finally, when it comes to putting tank vacuums to work and finding all of the ways they can be used, both Sanchez and Berjer suggest experimenting with the machines to see how they handle different cleaning situations.

"We have one elementary school that has tiled restroom floors with deep grouting," says Sanchez. "It was nearly impossible to get all the moisture and soil that accumulated in the grout using a push or damp mop. Now we vacuum them using a tank vacuum, and they have never been cleaner."

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Last modified on February 06, 2014



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