



# Sustainable Carpet Cleaning

By **Stephen Ashkin**

**W**hile carpet cleaning and professional cleaning are viewed as two distinct industries with their own special needs, concerns and interests, they do have many things in common. For instance, at the top of the list, the ultimate goal of both industries is to provide end customers with a healthier, cleaner and more pleasing indoor environment.

Both industries have also become much greener over the past decade. They are selecting products and equipment and incorporating cleaning procedures that have a reduced impact on health and the environment.

And now, a new focus is evolving. Both industries are getting more and more sustainable, and, in some ways, this may take hold in the carpet cleaning industry even faster than in the professional

cleaning industry. This is because the carpet cleaning industry tends to use a lot more water, chemicals and electricity. Because of all the traveling carpet cleaning technicians must do, more fuel and petroleum is also used compared to the cleaning industry. Further, many carpet cleaning professionals are fast becoming aware of the fact that being more sustainable can significantly reduce costs for a carpet cleaning company as well as improve efficiency, enhance customer, worker and community relations and prove to be an effective marketing tool to boot.

As a byproduct of this movement, carpet cleaning technicians can also help their end customers — whether it is homes, schools, or offices — become more sustainable. This is because the re-

sult of this evolution is a “culture of sustainability,” where, among other things, everyone thinks about how their daily actions and building operations will impact the environment and use of natural resources.



- 1** Many carpet cleaning professionals are fast becoming aware of the fact that being more sustainable can significantly reduce costs
- 2** To become more sustainable, consider doing something as simple as purchasing chemicals in bulk sizes
- 3** Log on to [ICSmag.com](http://ICSmag.com) for info on traditional and evolving definitions of sustainability.



**Stephen P. Ashkin** is president of The Ashkin Group, a consulting firm specializing in greening the cleaning industry and CEO of Sustainability Tool LLC, an electronic dashboard that allows organizations to measure and report on their sustainability efforts. He is also coauthor of both *The Business of Green Cleaning* and *Green Cleaning for Dummies*.

## What a Sustainable Carpet Cleaning Company Looks Like

Carpet cleaning technicians may not realize just how easy it can be for them to make their operations more sustainable. Among the possibilities are the following:

- **Purchase chemicals in bulk sizes:** Most carpet cleaning chemicals are packaged in 1-gallon containers (primary packaging) and are typically sold to end users in cases of three to six 1-gallon containers (secondary or intermediate package). Then they're shipped to distributors from manufacturers in even larger packages or pallets known as "transport packages." Some chemicals, such as spotters, are often sold in even smaller containers (16- and 32-ounce containers), but they too are delivered in primary, secondary and transport packages. This entire process requires huge amounts of packaging materials, which are often not derived from recycled or recyclable materials, and requires large amounts of fuel for transportation and delivery, which also adds to greenhouse gases and generates a lot of waste that often ends up in landfills. By simply selecting chemicals in bulk sizes, such as 5-gallon containers, a lot of this burden on the environment and natural resources can be eliminated. This also can help to reduce costs throughout the distribution chain, including the costs to the end customer, who in this case, is the carpet cleaning technician.
- **Become a carpet care adviser:** Customers, whether in residential or commercial locations, are more dependent on cleaning technicians to advise them on their carpet cleaning needs than they may realize. And stepping into the role of carpet care adviser is one of the most effective ways a technician can build long-term customer loyalty. So how does a technician become an adviser? One of the most significant ways, which also promotes sustainability, is to help them prioritize their carpet cleaning frequencies based on need... not want. Many facility man-

agers may *want* the carpets in executive offices cleaned, for instance, but do they need it? Often executive office areas stay cleaner than other areas and need carpet cleaning the least in a facility. Instead, carpet cleaning should be prioritized so that the more soiled areas, such as the first floors of a multi-floor facility, receive more frequent carpet cleaning while less soiled areas, such as those executive offices, receive far less. Many cleaning professionals have found that by putting greater emphasis on lower-floor cleaning, the entire facility stays cleaner. This results in less chemical use, smaller amounts of packaging materials, reduced fuel needs and reduced carpet cleaning and floor refinishing cycles, all of which helps promote sustainability.

- **Promote social equity:** Most of us are aware that sustainability typically involves the reduced use of natural resources along with the use of products and services that have a reduced impact on the environment. However, a third and important component of sustainability is the social or human dimension. This "people" component refers to fair, ethical and beneficial business practices toward employees, community and the country in which a business operates. As to workers specifically, this typically means paying them a fair living wage and providing adequate training so that workers can perform their jobs both effectively and safely. (See sidebar: "Traditional and Evolving Definitions of Sustainability.")

## Other Ways to Be More Sustainable

Manufacturers in the professional carpet cleaning industry have also taken a number of steps to help the industry become not only greener, but more sustainable. For instance, many chemicals are now green-certified. In most cases, not only do these chemicals have a reduced impact on health and the environment, but they are proving comparable in performance to conventional cleaning

agents and do not include ingredients such as petroleum by-products and other natural resources that are not sustainable.

In addition, many of these chemicals now work effectively using cold water. While the use of cold water when cleaning carpets is somewhat controversial, what is not controversial is the fact that heated extractors typically use more fuel and electricity than cold-water systems. Just as using cold-water laundry detergents helps reduce energy needs, using cold-water carpet cleaning chemicals requires less energy and helps promote sustainability.



Low-flow or low-moisture extractors are also making a major contribution to the sustainability of carpet cleaning. For the most part, these systems were originally developed to help carpets dry faster after cleaning. As a side benefit, they often use considerably less water and chemical than conventional extractors, both of which contribute to sustainability significantly.

A final way carpet cleaning technicians can make their businesses more sustainable is to keep their equipment in tip-top condition. Properly working extractors, wands, attachments, etc. will not only make the technician's job easier, but likely require less energy and chemical, making them more sustainable. And along with proper maintenance, technicians should consider updating and replacing carpet cleaning equipment every five to seven years. Not only will some machines approach the end of their life span during this time, but because manufacturers are placing so much more emphasis on making their equipment greener and more sustainable, newer machines are likely to operate in a leaner and greener manner, which usually means a more sustainable manner as well. ○