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UP CLOSE: CARPET CARE

Rising Demand For Certified Equipment And Chemicals

Customers are asking for approved products from the Carpet and Rug Institute. What sets them apart?

By Cynthia Kincaid
 Email the SM editors

Years ago, cleaning solutions and equipment were used without much thought to effectiveness — or the impact on the environment. So the Dalton, Ga.-based [Carpet and Rug Institute \(CRI\)](#) conducted a survey asking residential and commercial customers about carpet care.

"We were astonished to find that the number one issue that every demographic had with carpet was their feeling that carpet couldn't be cleaned or maintained," says Werner Braun, president of CRI. "And to our dismay, there was no one testing and certifying cleaning chemicals and equipment, so we decided to get into the business of testing and certifying."

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The initial tests returned surprising results.

[ProTeam](#) "Some of the best-known and priciest vacuums, even though they did a good job of cleaning, would put as much as a years worth of wear on the carpet in 10 vacuums," says Braun. "The vast majority that we tested got out less than 35 percent of the soil that was in the carpet."

CRI also tested spot removers and found the same problems.

"A lot of spot removers leave a chemical residue, and that material acts as a magnet for picking up new soil," says Braun. "So a consumer might get the spot out and be very happy and then be dismayed a week later when the spots come back. And where it was a quarter-sized spot, it would be six inches in diameter."

The organization also began similar testing for extractors, in tank and free sprays, and deep cleaning systems.

"We found out there were real problems and a void in terms of anybody looking at these products and determining which ones worked and which ones didn't," says Braun.

The result of all the testing was the birth of CRI's Seal of Approval program. The program focuses on testing for cleaning effectiveness in vacuums, extractors and deep cleaning systems, and carpet chemicals. To qualify for the Seal, extractors must meet stringent standards in soil removal, water removal and texture retention. Vacuums meet standards in soil removal, dust containment and carpet fiber retention. Currently, many CRI-

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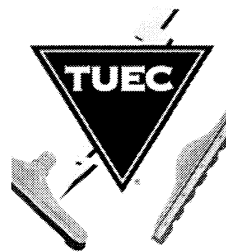
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certified vacuums display a Green Label certification, but this program is being phased out in 2010.

CRI uses [NASA](#)-enhanced x-ray fluorescence technology to measure the precise amount of soil removed from the carpet, and soil removal efficiency is rated on three levels: gold, silver and bronze. Extractors and vacuums that exceed average soil removal levels (and for vacuums, dust containment) receive a Bronze Seal rating. Those achieving a higher soil removal level receive a Silver Seal rating. Extractors and vacuums that remove the highest level of soil earn the CRI Gold Seal of Approval.

The CRI Seal of Approval program for cleaning solutions tests the cleaning effectiveness of spot removers, pre-spray and in-tank cleaning chemicals. To earn the Seal of Approval, they are rated on overall cleaning effectiveness, rate of resoiling, pH, surface texture change, optical brighteners and colorfastness.

An Industry Trend

Because of their effectiveness, more cleaning companies and distributors are offering CRI Seal of Approval products to their customers.

"It's a third party certification," says Linda Silverman, owner of [Maintex Inc.](#), City of Industry, Calif. "There are not a lot of companies that can self-certify, but sometimes when people go through the rigors of lab testing and certification, you feel that the product you are representing truly does what it says it's going to do vs. someone just making claims."

The certification also gives peace of mind to users.

"With everything heading in the direction of green, you want to make sure you are not going to use a vacuum that will re-emit as much dirt and dust into the air as you picked up off the ground," says Silverman. "So when you have the CRI certification, you know the products have been tested."

Some distributors make it a point to highlight CRI's certified products.

"The products that we sell, that have a CRI certification, are in equipment," says Keith Schneringer, marketing manager for [Waxie Sanitary Supply](#), San Diego. "We market the fact that the manufacturer went through the process [of certification], and when the manufacturer goes through that process, we offer an attractive distribution channel for them. We provide a platform by which we can highlight their certified products, so that customers who are looking for a greener product can go right to that product."

Customer demand for CRI-certified products will only increase over time, says Rick Alston, vice president of training and information at Basic Maintenance Supplies, Philadelphia, and director of education for the Low Moisture Carpet Cleaners Association.

Also, many manufacturers are starting to tie carpet warranties to the use of Seal of Approval products, says Bethany Richmond, communications manager for CRI.

A Multitude Of Benefits

The benefits for consumers using certified products are many.

"If you use these products, you're going to have a much better looking carpet, and it's going to last its design life," says Braun. "If you have a carpet that has a design life of 11 years and because it is improperly maintained it uglies out in three years, you have thrown a third of your investment away. And it's not good for the environment."

The business benefit of providing these products is also being felt.

"Everyone is getting more conscious of what we are doing in this industry," says Alston. "Twenty or 30 years ago, when we put a product out there and said it worked, it worked. We didn't care about how efficient it was, or what effect or harm it did, because we didn't know better. But people are getting more conscious about products and wanting to know who has approved them. As a distributor, we have to follow that trend to stay competitive."

Cost savings continues to be at the center of customer concern, and providing certified cleaning products and equipment could help address those concerns.

"Our business has traditionally been recession resistant, but people are starting to look at some of

these capital items," says Silverman. "If they think the price is going to be relatively equal, and they are going to have something more durable that doesn't have to be replaced as frequently, then it will be something they are going to take into consideration."

Finally, as customers become increasingly aware of the environment, the purchase and use of certified products is playing a more vital role.

"In the olden days, people bought a lot of vacuums that were disposable," says Silverman. "I think people are starting to say, 'That's not very beneficial. We are dumping all this junk into the landfill, so if we can buy something that is more durable and performs better, and we don't have to clean as frequently, then truly the cost is less.'"

Continuing Demand

Federal, state and local governments have begun demanding more certified, eco-friendly cleaning products and equipment, and CRI-approved equipment meets these guidelines.

"Public schools K-12 are concerned with protecting student health, and for colleges and universities, this is something that fits right in with their thinking of better for the environment and better for people's health," says Schneringer. "We are now starting to see property managers, office groups and corporations wanting to green up their work space. So you have all these different people coming at it from different directions, but the net result is that they want products that will help them fulfill individual goals."

CRI continuously makes changes and improvements to its certification program. Two years ago, the organization added its Seal of Approval Providers program, where carpet-cleaning professionals, who use Seal of Approval solutions, in conjunction with Seal of Approval equipment, are eligible to be recognized as Seal of Approval service providers.

"As the manufacturers improve their products, we continue to raise the bar for getting into the program," says Braun. "I guarantee we will continue to ratchet up the high bar to make sure the customer gets the very best products that they deserve."

This has prompted some distributors to take additional action in educating themselves and promoting these products to their customers.

"We want to make sure we are educated on the latest trends, so that we can give customers choices, and they can make educated decisions on what they want to purchase," says Schneringer.

Ultimately, CRI has undertaken this program to provide the very best services to its distributors, while ensuring customer satisfaction with their cleaning experience, says Braun.

"If I were in the cleaning business, I'd want the carpet to get clean and stay clean so that the customer is happy," he adds. "And I'd want to use the most cost effective products I could to make that happen. If you have products that work, you are going to have the highest probability of having a good outcome from your cleaning experience."

Cynthia Kincaid is a freelance writer based in Portland, Ore.