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FLOOR CLEANING EQUIPMENT Reducing the Cost of Floorcare

A March 2007 survey conducted by Tornado Industries, a manufacturer of professional cleaning equipment, queried facility managers and facility service providers on their cleaning purchasing plans for the coming year.

Those taking the survey were asked such questions as whether they plan to purchase a vacuum cleaner, floor machine or extractor in 2007 and what factors-such as price-influence their decisions. Approximately half of those responding were in either the healthcare or education industries.

Those taking the survey were also asked such questions as whether they plan to select Green cleaning products in 2007, replacing conventional products used for the same purpose. Half of the respondents said they do plan to select environmentally preferable products, indicating a continuing and growing trend toward Green cleaning in health-care and education facilities.

In addition to discussing new cleaning systems such as Green cleaning, one question addressed an issue that has had an impact on the professional cleaning industry for many years and has become even more critical in just the past few years. When asked what factors influence their purchases of

cleaning equipment such as floor machines and related products, the respondents overwhelmingly indicated they try to select equipment “that reduces the cost of cleaning.”

In most settings, as much as 90 percent of the cost of cleaning is labor, with the balance going toward products and equipment. And with the cost of labor going up, especially as a result of unionization and other factors affecting larger facilities, it is becoming increasingly important to find ways to reduce cleaning expenses. And in no other cleaning task is this truer than in hard-surface floor maintenance.

Budgeting for Floorcare

For some locations, such as industrial facilities, a facility manager must ask him- or herself how much their floors are worth. This refers to how much time, effort and money should be spent on keeping the floors looking top-notch and in a clean and shiny condition.

For an industrial facility, the answer may be that the floors should be kept clean without much regard to gloss. However, this is definitely not the case for healthcare facilities, whose managers often believe a high-gloss “wet-look” floor tells both patients and staff the facility is clean, sanitary, well maintained, and provides top-quality care.

The same can be said for many educational facilities as well. School cleaning has come under much greater scrutiny in recent years throughout the United States. Some states have even passed laws requiring school districts to maintain specific cleanliness standards at all times. And along with other cleaning tasks, quality floorcare has become a priority here as well.

“Floorcare can be as much as 80 percent of a facility’s total cleaning budget,” says William Griffin, a cleaning consultant based in Seattle, Washington. “If the appearance of the floors is of high importance to the facility, then finding ways to reduce the related labor costs to maintain the floors is critical.”

According to Griffin, the best way to address the labor cost issue is twofold: through proper training and the best equipment selection. With these two factors in place, facilities can reap significant savings that will affect their entire cleaning budget.

An Effective Floorcare Training Program

“It may sound like it comes right out of the U.S. Army, but one of the best ways to teach workers an effective and cost-reducing floorcare program is called ‘tell, show, do and review,’” says Michael Schaffer, president of Tornado Industries. “Training cleaning workers in this manner is a hands-on approach that is usually the most effective way to teach hard-surface floorcare.”

With this approach, the trainer first tells the worker about the importance of effective floorcare, including the simplest of procedures such as how to maintain floors on a daily basis by dust/damp mopping or vacuuming and, in time, more complicated floorcare issues such as how to strip, clean and refinish a floor are taught as well, according to Schaffer. “After the instructions, it is time to get on the floor and



Providing proper and effective training and using the best equipment are two of the best ways to lower floorcare costs and still keep floors clean and well maintained.

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show the worker the intricacies and components of effective floor maintenance,” he says. “It is also important here to address old habits that the cleaning worker may have learned that the facility manager may or may not want used in the facility. The manager must show the cleaning professional exactly how he or she wants the floor work performed in the facility.”

Once this part of the training program is completed, the worker is to actually start performing (do) floorcare work. Schaffer states that this part of the training program is not a onetime activity but may require working with the cleaning worker over several weeks, making sure he or she is performing tasks as trained.

“Finally, there is the review,” Schaffer says. “This is as important for the cleaning worker as it is for the instructor. Not only is the cleaning technician evaluated as to how well he or she performs floor maintenance duties as instructed, the instructor often discovers areas of the training program that may need more time or clarification.”

Proper Equipment Selection

According to Griffin, floorcare equipment has made significant advances in recent years. “The equipment is getting much simpler and easier to use,” he says.” And repair and downtime are becoming less frequent.”

He also indicates that floor machines are becoming “healthier,” helping to protect indoor air quality and the health of the cleaning worker as well as building occupants. This can be attributed to passive vacuum systems that are built in to some floor machines that allow the equipment’s motor to vacuum up the dust and contaminants that often become airborne when performing floorcare work. However, as important as this is, it does not necessarily help reduce the costs of hard-surface floor maintenance.

“One of the most significant ways to lower floorcare costs is by selecting bigger equipment,” Griffin says. “Buying the largest and most productive [floor-care] equipment you can use reduces [labor] costs and helps mechanize floor-care, making it faster and less labor intensive.”

Unfortunately, many facility managers, especially those in educational facilities, experience “sticker shock” when they see the costs of some floorcare equipment. This causes them to select smaller, less expensive equipment or even turn to mops and buckets instead of more productive ride-on or similar floor machines. “But these larger machines can perform most floorcare tasks such as sweeping, scrubbing and polishing in dramatically less time than when these task are performed manually,” he says. “The savings in time and labor can pay for these machines very quickly, often in months.”

Another way to reduce the expense to maintain floors is to consider different floorcare technologies. For instance, about 20 years ago, cylindrical brush floor machines were developed in Europe to address the fact that many of the older structures in that part of the world had uneven floors. Conventional rotary machines were often unable to clean these



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floors adequately. "With cylindrical brush technology, the machine better adjusts to uneven floors and because of the brushes, can better penetrate the floors' pores and grout areas."

The machines are now available in the United States and as is often the case with new products, other benefits have been discovered over time. One of the most significant, says Schaffer, is the fact that these machines are much easier to use. Unlike rotary machines, which can be difficult to operate and require considerable training, cylindrical machines "glide" over the floor surface. "This improves worker productivity and reduces fatigue, both of which can lower labor costs," he says.

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, because the brushes can better penetrate a floor surface and because these machines also have greater contact pressure on the floor, they remove more soil. "Often a floorcare technician will have to make two, three or more passes over a heavily soiled area," according to Schaffer. "If this can be reduced to just one pass, obviously the work is performed faster and more cost efficiently." Floorcare is costly and demanding work. In most settings, hard-surface floors require more time and labor to maintain than do carpets, which means their upkeep is almost always more expensive than carpet care. Because of this, providing proper and effective training and using the best equipment-often with new floorcare technologies-are two of the best ways to lower floorcare costs and still keep floors clean and well maintained.

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