Technical Bulletin

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Providing A Curtain Cleaning Service

Many professional cleaners find curtain cleaning a profitable service but it does need specialist expertise, as well as attention to detail, to avoid the pitfalls. The precise attention to detail starts at the reception counter where the receptionist, or counter staff, should measure the curtains, in front of the customer if time allows, and record the dimensions, in writing, on a system that can be filed for future reference. This will allow the cleaner to work out precisely the extent of any shrinkage, which is usually caused by relaxation, that occurs in cleaning and decide then what action to take. Relaxation shrinkage is a major problem with most curtains and is one that cleaners should take seriously in any customer care programme.

Sadly, many cleaners believe that there is a British, or European, standard allowing them to shrink a curtain by up to 3%, but they are confused because the standard they are thinking of allows the curtain maker, and/or the fabric maker a 3% tolerance, then in subsequent cleaning it covers and allows for the natural relaxation of a cotton curtain. Cotton curtaining is normally finished under tension during manufacture of the cloth and it is difficult for them to avoid setting a slight stretch into the cloth, and it is this set which is released in the first few cleans, usually the first if professionally "wet cleaned", or washed. If the maker sets a higher relaxation potential into the fabric, say 5%, then it will shrink by this amount and this will be released, usually on the first cleaning.

The drycleaner can neither predict nor avoid this and the fact that the curtain may shrink through relaxation shrinkage by more than 3% is the maker's responsibility, not the cleaner's.

However, the dry cleaner is responsible if silk, or viscose rayon, curtains shrink because of their failure to control the moisture in the drycleaning machine. Here it is the cleaner's skill and knowledge which should also have included pre-drying curtains before cleaning to prevent this shrinkage, or cracking and greying which can also result from additional moisture in dry cleaning these fibres. Cleaners accepting curtains with acrylic or modacrylic fibres should also be aware that they can suffer thermal shrinkage if the cleaner does not lower the drying temperature correctly (to 50ºC for acrylic and 40ºC for modacrylic fabric). In this case the cleaner is responsible. Normally, an acrylic or modacrylic should only relax by up to 2% but thermal shrinkage can increase this total to 7%. The cleaner would then be responsible for the extra 5%. Moisture will also cause felting shrinkage of wool, or wool mixture curtains as well as thermal interlinings containing wool fibres.

There is now an increase in the number of curtain suppliers who will pre-shrink the fabric before it is sold, so that there is no relaxation shrinkage, but if a curtain suffers significant relaxation shrinkage, it may need to be re-stretched and set to length on a specialist vertical curtain finishing machine. Curtain Cleaner Specialists often own one of these vertical finishing machines to set themselves apart from the normal high street cleaner, but if you know a cleaner who owns one you may be able to come to some arrangement for them to support your service.

In the absence of a specialist vertical machine how can relaxation shrinkage be dealt with?

If the curtain has a three-row Rufflette header tape, then when the curtains were sold, the retailer should have advised the customer to hang them on the bottom row and this then allows the curtain to be lowered by hanging on the second, or top, row after cleaning, in two 25mm steps. A good curtain maker will leave a good hem and this can be let down, preferably before cleaning, and re-made to the correct length afterwards. In this case, the cleaner should treat any ingrained soil in the hemline with neat pre-spot detergent so that the hem is as clean as possible following the cleaning process.

Cleaners with experience of curtain cleaning know that they can be very dusty when received, and some may even tumble them in a dryer to remove some of this before cleaning. They can also be a source of lint and fluff which coats the inside of the cleaning machine and a procedure for removal of this build up can be built into a programme on a modern machine, because if not removed it can cause other problems, such as extended drying periods or circular spots appearing on subsequent loads which can prove difficult to remove. Cleaning curtains also needs more process space due to their bulky nature and you may find that room height can be a problem when trying to finish full length curtains, and vertical curtain finishing machines certainly demand a higher roof height.

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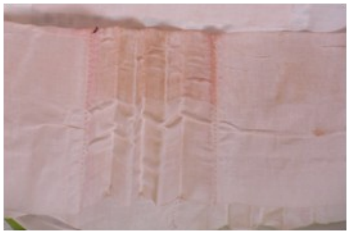

The header of a curtain may finish up with a rippling and creasing effect after cleaning and this is as a result of the differing amounts of shrinkage in the fabrics used to make up the header components and it could be then result in a partial delamination of the buckram used in this stiffening. This laminate can sometimes not have been designed for cleaning in either solvent or water. The curtain maker is responsible for this because the curtains could be considered to be "not fit for purpose". The cleaner cannot be held responsible because they have not made any mistakes, but a professional cleaner should certainly have asked the owner to authorise the cleaning because of the delamination risk, or if the curtains are not labelled for cleaning by the method used, and this is using your specialist skill and judgement. In the case of delamination the curtain could be disassembled and re-made with fresh buckram but the customer may not wish to pay for this expensive and time consuming repair. When examining customer's curtains it is advised that you also check if buckram has been used to stiffen the hem at the top of the curtain to accommodate the 3 pronged hooks that are used to support the attractive fashionable pleats at the top of some curtains. The buckram has a stiffening agent that can break down over time and light exposure and can also break down during the cleaning process. Secondly check that the curtain fabric and lining have not been glued to the buckram as this can also break down and damage the fabric.
There are examples where was found that the buckram had broken down and the stiffening agent that had been used had turned into brown dust, much of this had been flushed away in the cleaning process but on the stitched pleats the dust had been trapped which had caused excessive staining, this staining had proved impossible to completely remove without risking further damage to the curtains and as the cleaner you could be faced a claim from the customer.

Risk with thermal linings:- Curtain's with thermal lining risk degradation due to exposure to sunlight referred to as Ultra Violet (UV). Usually after cleaning a partial loss of the thermal insulation can be seen on the outer fabric's plastic back-coating. It may be seen to have lost more in the areas seen to match the parts of the window most exposed to light. When new the thermal back-coating would probably pass a clean ability test with flying colours but prolonged exposure to light, particularly UV light, seriously degrades the coating and this then quickly breaks up when the curtain is cleaned. The curtain maker is to blame because when testing coatings of this type for clean ability it is essential to use a sample that has been at the window for at least twelve months or more. Also, reduce the temperature in drying to avoid further damage to the lining.

Equally curtain linings up on windows exposed to sunlight can degrade and weaken, and this can be seen to be in vertical folds of lighter shaded areas. These are now weaker than the rest of the cloth and can breakdown in cleaning especially in water based systems, no matter how gentle they are. This should also be pointed out to the customer on receipt of the curtains. Also, in moist conditions the curtain can show areas of mildew which will prove very difficult, or even impossible to remove in the cleaning process, whatever system used. Mildew is a fungus and grows on the fibre, usually cotton, and weakens and blackens the surface, and is a growing substance eating into the fabric structure.

Cleaning velvet curtains requires special consideration because velvet is not a fibre but a fabric with a short, closely woven pile, and can be made from cotton, silk, nylon, rayon, acetate fibres, or a blend of these. It is important to determine which type you are handling as different techniques are required. The surface can be plain or have a pattern created by different pile lengths or density. Panne velvet describes a pattern formed by embossing, or crushing, the pile into different directions. Acetate velvet pile can be permanently flattened by stains containing moisture (which can come from window condensation or floor carpet cleaning) and great care must be taken to avoid disturbing the pile direction on panne velvet. Also acetate velvet pile can be permanently flattened by the use of wet side spotting reagents. Use a light tamping to minimise mechanical action and water soluble stains should be removed before dry cleaning. It is important to ensure that any moisture used during stain removal is entirely dried before cleaning. Remember velvet pile is set to run in one direction and it must therefore be finished in the same direction to retain its' appearance and lustre. Take care not to touch or brush acetate velvet when wet with steam or the pile will flatten causing it to look shiny. Velvets made from fibres other than acetate will respond well to a light steam on the bottom buck of a press and gentle brushing with a wide soft brush in the direction of the pile, vacuuming well between each lay. Never allow the pile to come into contact with a hard object until it is completely dry.

Modacrylic, as the name implies is a modified form of acrylic, and trade names include Dynel, Verel, and Teklan, and can be found in blankets as well as curtains. It is popular because it is flame resistant and can be permanently pleated and creased by heat setting. It can also be stretched in a range from 38% to 53% of the original size in a wet or dry state. A benefit is it is resistant to mildew and insect attack, but its' drawback is it is extremely heat sensitive and the use of a steam gun can permanently distort a pile fibre. Careful control of drying temperature is essential and curtains made from this fibre should be taken from the machine drum immediately at the end of the cycle. Avoid steam in finishing and if the care label permits use a low temperature iron only.

Dark colours, especially reds and navy, may bleed in cleaning on any curtain material and precautions should be taken when cleaning contrast colours such as red and white or navy and white. Good cleaners learn from experience and warning customers of the potential of damage, especially with hand made curtains, or with buckram interlinings, or possible damage to linings subject the UV damage, is not a sign of weakness but following good customer care practice.