

Cleaning Protected Leather

CLEANING PROTECTED LEATHER

The leather market has been steadily growing for about 2 decades. Leather accounts for 38% of all upholstered furniture sales (based on dollar volume.) The biggest increase is in high end pieces which are found in the homes and offices of many cleaners preferred market. World-wide, sales reached \$7.9 billion (yes, billion with a B.) in 2010. This was followed by a 14% gain to about \$9 billion in sales for 2011 and \$12.45 billion for 2017. The steady growth looks like it will continue.

More and more leather is everywhere from cars to offices to family rooms to hotel lobbies. The list goes on and on. Not only is more leather being sold, but the average piece of leather upholstery has a longer useful life than fabric upholstery. The average life span of leather furniture is at least ten years, which assures cleaners of service opportunities for years to come.

Eighty to eighty five percent of the leather being sold is Protected leather (also known as painted, pigmented or simply type P leather.) This is simply aniline dyed leather with a heavy pigment coat sealed by a polyurethane resin. Because protected leather is easy to clean and so popular, it is a great starting point for those wanting to explore leather cleaning.

Identifying Protected Leather



Protected leather is fairly easy to identify when compared to the two other popular upholstery leather types, aniline and nubuck/suede. Visually, protected leather has consistent coloration resulting from the heavy pigmentation process. Any individual marks on the leather from bug bites,

cuts from barbed wire, wrinkles and so forth are covered over. Use of a color not typically found in nature is one more sign of a pigmented coating. If it is still not obvious, another easy test is to open a cushion and look for a color difference between the front and back sides of the leather. This is a result of 200 dye choices covered by over 1200 choices of different pigments. This test sometimes is misleading as the pigment on the surface and the dye seen on the back can be too close to show a distinct difference.

Sometimes it may have been given a two tone effect called kela or sauvage which is usually a black dye rubbed over the base pigment color.

Protected leather is stiffer than Aniline or Nubuck leather because you are feeling the polyurethane rather than the soft surface of naked or aniline leather. Protected leather feels cooler to the back of the hand. A light scratch with a fingernail will not penetrate the polyurethane to scratch the leather surface as long as the finish is intact. Aniline and Nubuck leathers will generally scratch easily to a lighter color.

Water drops will absorb into the surface of Aniline and Nubuck leathers even with quality surface protectants, while water drops will sit on the top of the polyurethane coating of type "P" leather for an extended period of time. One more test is to locate an inconspicuous spot and rub in a drop of Hydro-Force Leather Protector. It will make little or no change to the appearance of protected leather. Aniline leather will darken but later dry clear. Nubuck will darken and stay darker. In short, differentiating protected leather from aniline or nubuck leather is a fairly simple task.

Inspection of Protected Leather

Protected leather is by far the easiest leather to clean, since if the finish is intact, you are cleaning the protective polyurethane and not the leather itself. Your greatest difficulty is persuading your customers to clean their leather on a regular basis. Typically, they have been told by a salesman that protected leather is low maintenance. The new buyer translates that into a no maintenance product.

The polyurethane finish is durable in the short term, but somewhat fragile in the long run. The finish of Protected leather is 90% polyurethane and 10% plastifiers and is very

durable as long as that balance is maintained. Oils from the body or other sources attack the polyurethane softening the finish to the point of it being able to be peeled or worn off. Improper cleaning products attack the plastifiers drying the finish, causing it to crack. Peeling and cracking of the finish transform a low maintenance situation into a need for extensive restoration to repair the damage. I know of leather professionals, who do not clean leather, but when nature (time and use) has taken its course, they are provided with an abundance of restoration business to refurbish protected leather. The old adage, "Pay me a little now, or pay me a lot later" is especially true with protected leather.

We strongly suggest you use either Hydro-Force or LeatherMaster cleaning products to avoid drying out the leather. Using the wrong leather cleaner may give an acceptable appearance, but over time damage is done.

Now that you have identified the leather as protected, you need to closely examine the furniture. Look for split seams, natural marks, stains, damage to the finish in the form of deep scratches, cracking and/or peeling. Be sure to examine areas closely where body oils are prone to accumulate. Look for worn areas where some or all of the protective finish is gone. Record any issues on your inspection form. Doing this in the presence of the customer assures you that the problems of the leather remain with the customer. Damage and wear to the finish is not going to be resolved by cleaning and in some cases will become more noticeable after cleaning. For example, areas impacted with hair oils and body oils can hide damage to the finish.

Cleaning Protected Leather



Not all leather is tanned the same way. The leather used in upholstery is not the same as leather used in clothing, purses or to cover baseballs. Some leather cleaning products,

saddle soap for example, have migrated to our industry but were originally formulated for use on other types of leather. Select leather cleaning products formulated specifically for upholstery leather. Beware of one-product-fits-all cleaners.

You are now ready for the easiest part of the cleaning process. You can start with Hydro-Force Leather Cleaner or use LeatherMaster's Strong Cleaner. Both are water-based cleaners that produce plenty of foam. Simply apply several drops of cleaner to a sponge dampened with warm water. Foam it up and apply to the leather in a circular motion. Remove soil released by the cleaner with a clean terrycloth towel. For heavy soils, the use of a horsehair brush or even super fine steel wool (0000) will add some additional agitation to aid the cleaning process. Periodically rinse out the sponges to remove collected soil. Heavily used areas may require more than one cleaning pass.



On some jobs there will be a need to use additional spotters to take out stains that have bonded to the surface of the finish. The spotters that you may need for protected leather are LeatherMaster's Super Remover, Soft Remover, Ink Lifter and possibly Leather Degreaser (aerosol). These can be obtained individually when needed or as part of a complete leather cleaning kit.

Super Remover will be used frequently to remove pigments transferred from blue jeans, newsprint, mustard and other difficult stains. It should always be pre-tested in an inconspicuous place before use. If the protective finish has been degraded, this spotter may remove the stain plus the pigment in the leather and/or the dye used to create the two tone effect on some leathers. When a less aggressive product is needed, it can be diluted down with distilled water as much

Protecting Leather

Following cleaning, it is important to apply a protector to prevent stains from penetrating into the leather. This is especially critical for items that get a lot of use or where the original polyurethane finish has become worn. Protection Cream also keeps the leather soft and supple rather than becoming stiff with age. Hydro-Force Leather Protector should be applied every 6 months for heavily used leather and annual for pieces that get less use. I suggest including the charge for protection with the price for cleaning. If there is objection to the price, you can always drop down to a price for only cleaning.

The leather needs to be dry before proceeding with the application of Leather Protector. It is not necessary to dry with a hair dryer, but some air movement will speed drying. Apply protector to a soft lint-free cloth and rub evenly over the surface of the leather. If a lot of soil is coming onto the soft cloth, then you may need to stop and reclean before you continue. A second coat of Leather Protector is beneficial on pieces that have accumulated some wear. Allow the final coat to dry naturally without any assistance from heat or air movement.

If the leather dries tacky, then the protector was applied before the leather was completely dry. Reclean to remove this tackiness.

You could stop here, but there is one more service you can offer. Leather exposed to sun, heat, dry climates, heavy use or age, require the use of a revitalizer. This remoisturizes dry leather and gives it a softer feel. Fat liquors, the original oils in the leather from the animal and from the tanning process, are replaced. The original supple feel of the leather is restored. The leather will last longer without becoming stiff or cracking.

Hydro-Force Leather Revitalizer is the product of choice. Leather Master Leather Vital is another option. In addition to keeping leather soft, it eliminates squeaky leather-on-leather noises. Revitalizer should be allowed to dry on its own. This assures penetration from the surface to the back of the leather.

Pricing

Like pricing for any cleaning service, there are variations according to the local market and the level of service delivered. Pricing for the cleaning of protected leather should be divided into maintenance and restorative cleaning. Because leather should have a protector applied following every cleaning, I suggest your charge include both cleaning and protecting. The application of Leather Revitalizer could also be included in a package price or offered as an option at additional cost.

Charges for routine maintenance cleaning would be approximately 50% higher than for a similar piece of fabric upholstery. Your fees for restorative cleaning would be significantly higher.

As you become comfortable with the process of cleaning protected leather, you will gain confidence to take the next steps, cleaning aniline and nubuck leather. Watch for articles on these leather types in the coming months.

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