



Debunking Chemical Myths

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There are a few urban legends in our cleaning trade that I think deserve some air time. They center on the chemistry we use and have become increasingly dependent upon for our profitability.

Myth #1: Everything in the world can be cleaned by throwing a little bleach on it.

Myth #2: All you need is a handful of soda beads to make the best cleaner for the job.

Myth #3: Prepared cleaners (products designed by chemists to target certain cleaning challenges) are too expensive to use and therefore cut into a contractor's necessary profitability.

My Perspective

Of course my opinion on all of these things is somewhat biased. My company is a leading seller of prepared cleaners to the industry. The reason I have promoted cleaners over the years goes back to my days as a contractor and my experience using all sorts of cleaners, which is the reason I wanted to start this discussion among contractors here.

Like most contractors, what I was on the lookout for in those days was the one single cleaner I could carry on my truck that would handle everything I would encounter. I soon learned just how naïve this was, but not before trying everything I could lay my hands on locally. In fact, probably 90 percent of the cleaners I tried just plain didn't work on anything very well.

I later figured out that products the general public could buy would never accomplish much. Too many lawyers were involved in deciding what was safe enough to sell to Do-It-Yourselfers. When McDonalds was sued because the coffee was hot I realized that I could never find the power I wanted in a

cleaner that just anybody could buy.

From there I turned to a few different suppliers who specialized in chemical products for contractors. One sold predominantly powders, and the other sold liquids. I found concentrated power in each, although the powders gave me fits because they didn't dissolve well in the cold water I had available. What I really discovered was the variety of cleaning products available and how they applied to the variety of jobs that I was doing. Suddenly I regretted all those wasted hours playing dots in chemistry class just waiting for the clock to move. The chemistry of cleaning fascinated me and I set out to learn whatever I could.

Since our company specialized in cleaning and sealing decks and fences, we were actually "soft washing" (cleaning with chemistry and minimal pressure) long before this term became the latest buzzword. Chemistry played a huge role in our ability to do the work and turn a profit. Alkalines, acids, surfactants and all of the possible variations became more important every day.

When we started the supply division of Sun Brite, we started it with wood cleaners that we had developed in conjunction with a local manufacturer. These were the cleaners we found worked better than anything we were able to buy elsewhere because we were concentrating on our specialty. We used these cleaners every day, and that gave us the confidence to offer them to others. Our jobs went faster and we made more money on those jobs with these cleaners. It was a slam dunk.

The popular cleaning method for decks at the time was to throw a little bleach at the

wood (maybe with a little dish soap mixed in, or maybe not). Sound familiar? So right off the bat, Sun Brite was bucking the popular methods by promoting cleaners with specific strengths with specific surfactants made to leave the wood in the best possible condition. The cost to use these cleaners was comparable to using a homemade bleach mix (under \$1 per gallon), but the results were visibly and microscopically better. We didn't steal the color out of the wood and we didn't spend anywhere near as much time to rinse out the suds that dish soap left in the wood. In addition, we told our customers that we were more professional because we used "specially prepared wood cleaners" and that let us charge more for our work. At the end of the day, my company made more money per job than anybody else we compared notes with – which leads us back to the myths.

Myth 1: Just Throw Bleach on It

I have to admit to all of you that bleach has its place in any arsenal of cleaners. There is no better mold killer for the money that I know of. I use it whenever I am up against mold. It works for the mold on roofs and it takes the mildew off my lawn furniture in the spring.

Bleach alone is not a cleaner, however. It is

the action element in a bleach-based cleaner when you add a surfactant. Bleach mixes are not a one-size-fits-all solution, but they do have their place.

So why do so many contractors use bleach or a bleach mix as their cleaner of choice? The answer has several layers, but it starts with the urban myths I started with today and ends on the convenience factor. You can buy bleach anywhere. It is easy to find. You don't have to plan three days ahead for your needs as you would if you were buying a prepared cleaner from a supplier who is not local to you, either.

So what is wrong with using bleach? There are three major problems with bleach:

It is not stable. It breaks down in heat and sun over time. Bleach that is 12.5 percent on Monday can easily be 11 percent on Friday if it isn't properly protected. That means you use a different quantity on Monday than you do on Friday. That is a difficult thing to guess at.

It is not as effective as a cleaner as sodium hydroxide, for example. Just looking at the pH factor, the rating of bleach is 12.6 while the rating of sodium hydroxide is 13.5. Not only does this mean that sodium hydroxide is stronger, it means that every time you add



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bleach to your cleaner you are likely weakening that cleaner instead of strengthening that cleaner.

It is not always an appropriate combination for the surfactant or detergent you mix with it. Dish soap is created to wash dishes, not wood or concrete or your newborn baby's hair. We buy special no-tears shampoo for a child's hair because we want to protect that skin, that surface. We should adopt the same approach for every surface we want to clean, because that makes us more professional – to our employees and to our customers.

Now you can see bleach the way I do, as a necessary biocide agent but not as the world's best cleaner. Bleach is not a bad thing, but it is unpredictable and over-used and does not add to our image as an industry because of how it has been misused by people who didn't take the time to learn about the chemical.

Myth 2: Just Throw on Some Soda Beads

We should take a look at 'soda beads' next. For those who don't know, this is sodium hydroxide in its most usable form. You can create cleaners with it that are extremely effective and low cost. Soda beads are harder to find and buy than bleach, but they are stable and predictable and work very well against grease and oil. You can make an effective cleaner for driveways with it, for example.

I think that creating deck strippers with them is possible, but the lack of availability of good surfactants for wood makes this a shaky proposition for serious wood restoration contractors. The only reason ever expressed to me for making your own deck stripper with soda beads is the end cost of the product. No

one has ever made the case that they can make a better deck stripper, just a cheaper one. Considering that we sell deck strippers today that cost less than \$1.50 per gallon, this is not a really strong argument.

The important thing to understand about using soda beads is that sodium hydroxide is not always the best choice for a cleaner. If you are cleaning around a fast food outlet, for example, potassium hydroxide is a much faster and more effective chemical cleaner. It attacks animal fats far better than sodium hydroxide. It's better for cleaning hoods in restaurants, too. When you are cleaning those black stripes off of gutter surfaces and stucco, a solvent cleaner using d-limonene or butyl is a far better choice than sodium hydroxide.

So I will be the first to say that using soda beads can work on some jobs, particularly if you are able to lay your hands on the right surfactant for the job you need. I must also say at the same time that soda beads are not the best answer for all cases.

Myth 3: Prepared Chemicals are a Waste of Money

One final point – those folks (myself included) who develop and sell you cleaners are not the enemy. Quite the opposite, actually. If not for the guys in the white lab coats, we would be in the dark ages of cleaning. Most cleaners sold today are extremely powerful and cost effective.

Using homemade cleaners can work, but they have their limits. As I said earlier, we buy special shampoo for our children, special soap for the dishwasher and washing machine, and special soap to get our greasy hands clean after working on the truck engine.

I think we add to the image of the industry by using professional products created exactly for the job. When you do, it would be great if you bought your cleaner from my company. In the end, however, using a prepared cleaner from any distributor is arguably better than using a home-made concoction. I used this approach to make more money as a cleaning contractor, and you can too.

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