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Out, Damned Spot! Chairs, Sofas Cleaned

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In this economy, it's tough to justify spending big bucks to replace dingy or stained furniture that's still perfectly functional. So instead, we opted for a New Year's penny-pinching spruce up, calling in the pros to give our sofas and armchairs a deep clean.

It's not hard to find an upholstery-cleaning service in most towns these days. Many carpet and rug cleaners also work on furniture; the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and



Restoration Certification, a not-for-profit group, says there are some 8,774 technicians certified specifically in upholstery and fabric cleaning in the U.S. The group lists U.S. cleaners trained under its criteria at www.certifiedcleaners.org.

Interest in furniture and carpet cleaning is on the rise, a signal that money-conscious homeowners are angling to eke more use out of their old stuff. Between 2004 and 2008, the number of inquiries to the Better Business Bureau about carpet and rug cleaners (many of which do upholstery) roughly doubled to 313,039, putting it in the top 1% of industries ranked.

"A lot of times when people have money flowing in, instead of cleaning, they go buy new," says John Steiner, vice president of operations at Heaven's Best Carpet and Upholstery Cleaning Inc., a Rexburg, Idaho based franchisor. "But when times are tough, people say, 'Let's clean it up. We can make do one more year and put up with the color.' " He says recent sales have been up for many of his franchises, particularly in the middle of the country.

We located four services in our test locations of Chicago, New York City, Brookline, Mass., and Garrison, N.Y., including two national chains, Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Cleanpro USA LLC and Heaven's Best, as well as two regional firms, York Carpet Care Inc. based in Englewood Cliffs, N.J., and VioClean LLC of Swampscott, Mass. All the services scheduled appointments within a few days to a week. However, while every company was able to improve our years of accumulated stains -- from coffee and wine to gravy and green ink -- we found they couldn't rub them out altogether in several instances. Cleaners say the longer a stain sits, the harder it is to remove; oils, hot coffee and ink are particularly persistent plagues.

All our cleaners used variations of a cleaning process called water extraction, which involved spraying or injecting water and cleaning fluid onto fabric and then sucking it back out. Except for one, each said furniture should be dry in a couple of hours. (Cleanpro warned it could take 24 hours.) But most of our wares were still slightly damp the next day, making us glad we hadn't scheduled a dinner party that night. And while the

services said it was safe to be in the house while they worked, in some cases the machines were quite loud, making it tough to conduct phone calls. In one case, the headache-inducing scent of cleaning fluid sent us hunting for the Advil.

A couple of the companies promoted "green" or "organic" cleaning solutions and had logos on their Web sites from third-party organizations that certify products based on whether they meet stringent environmental and human health standards. That was a big selling point for those of us with children or pets. But in one instance, our green cleaner showed up with a product labeled "Hazard to Humans and Domestic Animals" after we'd specifically requested the organic service. And when we called the certification companies listed on the cleaner's Web site, it turned out the products weren't approved, and the company was misusing the logos.

Our best experience was with Cleanpro in Chicago. The company did an excellent job tackling moderate coffee and wine marks and dug out by hand some dog hair buried in the bottom of a sofa bed. The pros wore sneakers and covered the floors with tarps as they worked. They also stuck to their original phone quote and didn't push us on extras like tile and grout cleaning. Cleanpro's president, Kevin Owsley, says he collaborated with a hydrocarbon chemist to develop his water-based, biodegradable cleaning agent (it's not certified by any third party) and says his licensees use a cleaning method that doesn't let water penetrate as deep into furniture as typical extraction techniques, so pieces dry faster and don't leave residue buildup. (We didn't note residue as a problem in our other tests.)

Two companies heavily promoted their eco-friendly cleaning chops: York Carpet and VioClean. VioClean uses only Procyon cleaning products, which are certified by a third party nonprofit group called Green Seal. (Green Seal currently certifies cleaning products, not home cleaning services, although it will begin to do so this spring.) We were impressed by the professional demeanor of the VioClean workers, who spent two and a half hours scouring a six-foot-long putty-colored, pet-rubbed cotton-twill sofa with ink and dirt stains. They also scrubbed down an all-tile shower stall with grungy grout.

But the VioClean results, we thought, were fair to middling: A two-inch-long thick black ink stain was reduced and lightened but not removed on the couch. While the tiles cleaned up well in the shower, we thought about half the grungy black grout lines looked fresh. Still, we were happy the job came out cheaper than the phone price.



VioClean owner Trung Nguyen, who was on the job, says it's common for ink stains to linger if they've set in, and he says soap buildup in showers can make eliminating all grime tricky, particularly in corners.

Our roughest experience came with York Carpet. When the cleaning team arrived, they looked at our furniture and then presented us with a new estimate that was double the phone quote. The owner, Ron Ami, says what's quoted by telephone is "ballpark pricing" and that because our furniture was made of

natural fabrics and not synthetics, it made the job harder. (Another test location also had a natural fabric piece, but that didn't change the pricing.)

With two large golden retrievers in the house, we'd specifically requested York's "eco-friendly" and "organic" cleaning solutions touted online by a digital woman named Kim who said "all our products are absolutely nontoxic and environmentally safe." We felt confident because the company had posted logos from two reputable certification groups: Green Seal and EcoLogo. But then we looked at the labels of the products the cleaners brought inside our house. One, for Microban Clean Carpet Sanitizer, read: "Toxic to fish," "Hazard to Humans and Domestic Animals" and "Danger." The language on the other solution, Chemspec Biodegradable Powdered Haitian Cotton Upholstery Cleaner, seemed less intimidating but still read: "Evacuate treatment area of humans and pets."

While the cleaners said the products would be diluted with water, we were still unsure and called headquarters, eventually reaching Mr. Ami. He assured us the products were "very safe" and said he'd been using them for years. Still, he agreed to either knock the price down a bit or come back and use the all-organic products we'd originally requested. (He wouldn't specify what those products were on the phone). Given the inconvenience of rescheduling, we elected to go forward using just the Chemspec.

The polite workers spent a little over two hours cleaning, and the white couch, chair and chaise lounge did brighten up, with many stains disappearing. We also had a wool rug cleaned; the results were just OK, with a large dog-vomit stain virtually unchanged. There was also water pooled under the lip of the rug after the cleaners left, which we had to wipe up.

When we checked with Green Seal and EcoLogo, neither the Microban nor the Chemspec product used at our house were certified. (Other Chemspec cleaning agents are.) Nor was York Carpet authorized to use the company's eco-logos; Mr. Ami removed the logos after being contacted by the groups and replaced it with his own "York Carpet 100% Organic Products" button. He says some of his products are Green Seal certified and offered to come back and use organic products on other furniture at half price after we identified ourselves as being with The Wall Street Journal.

We were largely pleased with the performance of the national chain, Heaven's Best. Here they wrestled with two badly stained dining chairs -- one with a green child's pen and the other with coffee -- and two more harboring gravy stains. They also worked on beige ink-and-coffee-stained couch. Using spot remover and a small metal razor tool, the technician improved the stains on the couch, though the pen wouldn't come out altogether. Neither would the coffee stains. But overall, the pieces looked better than before, and we think we'll get another five years out of our couch. Meantime, the dining chairs came out looking like new, and they even cleaned a milk stain on our daughters' rug free of charge.

At Heaven's Best, there was no eco-option available. The company's vice president of operations, Mr. Steiner, says that its custom-made cleaning fluid is "nontoxic" and that Heaven's Best is looking into getting it certified by a third-party organization. Says Mr. Steiner: "I'd probably take a cup and drink part of it." We didn't ask him to follow through.

COMPANY /TEST LOCATION	ITEMS CLEANED	ECO-OPTIONS	COMMENT
Cleanpro USA LLC; www.cleanpro.com/Chicago	One sofa bed (\$85), one rocking armchair (\$45), two wing-back armchairs (\$30 each) and an ottoman (\$15)	Says it uses its own proprietary water-based, pH-neutral, biodegradable cleaning product that is environmentally safe. No certifications for cleaning solution yet.	Company's nearest location was 30 miles away, but they came at no extra charge. Cleaners did excellent job removing mild coffee and wine stains and dug dog hair out of our sofa bed by hand. We liked the vaguely sweet citrus smell in the air as they worked. They carefully covered floors with tarps.
Heaven's Best Carpet and Upholstery Cleaning, Inc.; www.heavensbest.com/ New York, N.Y.	4 dining-room chairs (\$7.50 per chair plus \$10 for fabric protector); 3-cushion beige sofa (\$80)	Company says it uses a "non-toxic" cleaner and is looking into eco-certification.	Marked improvement of ink stains on couch, though less so with old coffee stains. Removed green marker stain on one dining chair, as well as coffee and gravy blemishes. Cleaned couch throw pillows and rubbed out a milk stain on our daughters' bedroom carpet for free. One downside: a headache from listening to the loud extractor in our 1,100-square-foot apartment and breathing fumes from the citrusy cleaning fluid.
VioClean LLC; www.vioclean.com/ Brookline, Mass.	Six-foot putty-colored sofa (\$151.20); shower-tile cleaning (\$63.20)	Uses Procyon cleaning products certified by Green Seal.	We liked the professional work and that they honored their phone quote, also giving us a 20% first-time user discount. It was nice that they left sofa cushions to dry on brown paper, rather than on the floor. We wished our couch's ink stain had faded more, though it was improved. Shower tiles brightened nicely, but some grout was still dingy. Company was up front that their stain-guard product was not a green-certified item.
York Carpet Care Inc.; www.yorkcar.com/	White 3-cushion couch (\$180); white armchair (\$100); white chaise lounge	Company touted its "eco-friendly" and "organic"	When cleaners arrived, they doubled the over-the-phone quote for the couch and the

<p>pet.com/Garrison, N.Y.</p>	<p>(\$120); one 8'x10' shag rug (\$120)</p>	<p>cleaning solutions online and over the phone and posted certification seals on its Web site from independent rating groups Green Seal and EcoLogo.</p>	<p>chair, saying it was harder to clean natural fabrics. After we balked and called headquarters, the owner dropped the couch price \$40 and the chair and chaise \$20. Meanwhile, we'd specifically requested the organic/eco treatment over the phone, but the two cleaning/sanitizing products they brought weren't certified by Green Seal or EcoLogo. While the furniture looked brighter after cleaning, it took more than 24 hours to dry, versus the "few hours" promised.</p>
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