

# FIBER FACTS



## HIGH-END UPHOLSTERY CARE... Cleanability Letter Codes

We have written in previous editions of this newsletter about the “cleanability codes” associated with upholstery fabrics. In general, it is our opinion that many fabrics carry codes that are unnecessarily conservative. However, there are rare instances where even these seemingly over-safe instructions are completely wrong.

### A Quick Review

The cleanability codes used for upholstery fabrics are fairly straightforward. There are four of them\*:

**W**—Spot clean only with water-based shampoo or foam upholstery cleaner.

**S**—Spot clean only with a water-free dry cleaning solvent. **DO NOT USE WATER.**

**WS**—Spot clean with upholstery shampoo, foam from a mild detergent, or a mild dry cleaning solvent.

**X**—Clean only by vacuuming or light brushing with a non-metallic, stiff bristle brush. **DO NOT USE ANY WATER OR SOLVENT BASED CLEANER.**

\*These are the abbreviated cleaning instructions for each code. The full instructions include general recommendations such as pre-testing and not removing and laundering cushion covers.

These letter codes can sometimes be found on the deck of chairs and sofas. On custom pieces, the codes must often be referenced from memo samples or other sources, such as company websites.

### The Disconnect

It is no secret that the majority of upholstery fabrics (at least in our niche of the market) are designated with the cleanability code “S.” In simplest terms, this means that dry cleaning is the only recommended method of cleaning. Theoretically, an S code on a fabric means that the manufacturer has done colorfastness testing that has shown a problem with dye stability (bleeding/wet crocking).

Based on many years of experience, we suspect that the choice of this “dry clean only” recommendation is often not the result of actual testing, but is decided through an “abundance of caution” approach. How have we come to this opinion? In our testing, we find that many fabrics show no issues whatsoever when exposed to wet cleaning solutions.

### Hard to Go Wrong

Dry cleaning is the safest form of cleaning for the vast majority of upholstery fabrics. Why? Dry cleaning solvents almost never cause dimensional stability (shrinkage) issues. Likewise, dyes are almost universally insoluble in these products, meaning less colorfastness problems.

Though it is the safest cleaning method, dry cleaning of upholstery fabrics is considered vastly inferior to wet cleaning. Part of the problem is that “like dissolves like.” Water-based substances, which are by far the most common stains, are dissolved and removed most readily by water-based cleaning agents.

Still, dry cleaning is considered safe for almost all upholstery fabrics.

### Key Word: Almost

Nothing gets us in trouble like the very rare exception to a fact that is almost always true.

This is certainly the case with dry cleaning of upholstery fabrics. If an upholstery cleaning technician uses dry cleaning solvents on many different fabrics over the





course of several years and runs into no problems, his comfort level starts getting really high. His experience may even lead him to stop pretesting these products. And that's where the trouble starts.

Over the years, we have seen several dramatic examples of fabrics that were severely damaged by dry cleaning solvents:

- A heavily glazed/polished cotton fabric was dry cleaned, only to have the polished finish completely removed.
- A blue and white jacquard pillow was ruined by dry cleaning when the blue dyes bled into adjacent white areas.
- Another blue and white fabric, this time a printed material, was damaged when dry cleaning solvent (and agitation) caused the blue dye to crack.

Again, fabrics like these are very rare. But, what makes them even more notable is that every one of these fabrics carried the same cleanability code: "S". The manufacturers of these fabrics made the mistake of mislabeling them. And the cleaning technician then made the ultimate mistake.

### **Choose Wisely**

It is an unfortunate fact in the fabric care industry that really good courses for upholstery cleaning are almost nonexistent. Adding to the problem, relatively few cleaning technicians receive any significant training, either classroom or in the field. They are literally learning their craft on the client's furnishings!

Not so with Fiber-Seal. Our technicians receive extensive initial training and continuous training thereafter. We have courses at our Dallas headquarters for both basic and advanced technical training. We also publish frequent technical bulletins to teach new information and reinforce the basics.

And if you're a regular reader of our publications, you know that the one thing we stress to both technicians and clients is staying out of trouble by PRE-TESTING cleaning products.

### **Got A Question?**

We like to hear your questions and comments. In most cases, we learn just as much from these conversations as you do. Please feel free to contact us and let us know how we can help!

### **Designers' Corner**

Have you visited [www.FiberSeal.com](http://www.FiberSeal.com) to see what's new? Lots of great information can be found in Designers' Corner, including back issues of *FiberFacts!*

**You can also connect with us on our social media networks!**

