

Maintenance of Vinyl, Leather, Plastic, and Rubber Surfaces

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by Prentice St. Clair

The article below is the property of "Detail in Progress", which is owned by Prentice St. Clair. Mr. St. Clair provides consulting and training in automotive reconditioning. He can be reached directly at [_pstc875437@aol.com](mailto:pstc875437@aol.com) or (619) 701-1100. Please also visit [_Rightlook.com](http://Rightlook.com) for more information on training and products for automotive interior care. The Corvette Action Center would like to thank Mr. St. Clair for allowing us to include his work on our site. This article was written with professional automotive detailers in mind.



In general, two rules apply to the maintenance of vinyl, leather, plastic, and rubber vehicle surfaces: (1) always clean before conditioning and (2) always condition after cleaning. As always, there are exceptions to these rules, as we will see later. The exact procedure that you use will depend upon many factors including customer requirements, available chemicals and equipment, and the knowledge and experience of the operator. The following article will give the detailer some general information as a foundation upon which to develop his or her own preferred procedures. As I always recommend, stay in touch with your industry by reading trade magazines, attending local and national seminars and conventions, and remaining in constant contact with other detailing professionals and industry suppliers. A professional detailer will

investigate new products and equipment in the pursuit of continuously improving service to the customer.

Exterior

Tires and trim can be cleaned during the detail prep wash. I recommend washing and rinsing these dirtier areas before a final general wash of the painted panels. Tires and the rubber bumper trim on some older cars can be cleaned using a heavy-duty all-purpose cleaner and scrub brush or scrub sponge. This will remove dirt, brake dust, and oxidized rubber, which is the dark black substance that will come off during cleaning of these surfaces. Follow with a thorough rinse. Most other unpainted trim will be plastic or rubber, and includes decorative side-panel trim, window seals and trim, and the housings on many side-view mirrors. If the vehicle is a newer, well-maintained vehicle, no extra cleaning of these surfaces is necessary aside from the general wash. If the car is older or not well-maintained, however, clean the trim using a scrub sponge or a soft-bristled brush with a mild to medium-strength all-purpose cleaner. Be aware that strong or under-diluted cleaners can stain the painted panels that surround the trim part being cleaned. A very soft polypropylene brush will be very effective at cleaning these surfaces without scratching the bordering painted panels.

There are several dressing formula options for the exterior. Personal experimentation and consultation with your supplier(s) will help you determine which to use. For example, solvent-based dressings will last longer, especially on rubber surfaces; water-based dressings on the other trim areas may be perfectly sufficient, especially for express or frequent detailing. Also, especially for tires, it is important to determine your customer's preference--high-gloss, low-gloss, or something that will not rub off on his/her pants! (Note: a final wipe of the tires with a dry cloth usually takes care of this problem.) Spray dressing on tires and spread with a damp sponge. Wipe dressing on trim parts with a damp sponge or foam applicator moistened with dressing. Take your time and be thorough--sloppy dressing is very noticeable--just like sloppy house painting. It is important to dress all rubber and plastic exterior trim (especially prior to polishing and waxing painted surfaces), as this adds to the "showroom" appearance of the vehicle. Don't forget to dress the wheel wells; an inexpensive or heavily diluted dressing can be used here.

Interior

Cleaning of leather, vinyl, and plastic surfaces in the interior of a vehicle always starts with a thorough vacuum or blow-out (if you have compressed air available) of the surfaces. Using a vacuum with a duster brush attachment to clean dash and door panels will lift off excess dust, especially from vents, making cleaning easier. Also, it is critical

to remove debris from seams of leather and vinyl seats, as this grit can act as a grinding agent, reducing the strength of those seams over time.



Cleaning of plastic surfaces (such as the dash, door panels, and center console) and vinyl upholstery can be accomplished with a mild to medium strength all-purpose cleaner and a soft-bristled polypropylene brush. Dampen the brush with the cleaner (vice spraying directly onto the surface) and lightly brush the surfaces. Then wipe the surface with a clean, dry towel to remove the cleaner and dirt. A tougher nylon brush can be used on areas such as arm rests that are sometimes heavily soiled. If shoe scuffs do not come off with all-purpose cleaners, use a small amount of methyl ethyl ketone (MEK) poured on a sponge and gently wipe the scuffs off. Dress the interior surfaces thoroughly by wiping on the dressing using a clean sponge or foam applicator dampened with the dressing. Always use a clean applicator for each job, as the applicator will pick up any leftover soil while dressing.

(There are combination cleaner/conditioner formulas available. These can be very efficient for an express detailing situation in which the customer is not willing to pay full price for complete detailing or in frequent detailing situations in which the surfaces just don't get dirty enough to justify fully cleaning before conditioning. Just remember that anytime two chemicals with completely different functions are combined, the effectiveness of each chemical is reduced.)

A discussion of leather care could take up this entire article, so here are some basics that should be followed up with more extensive research. In general, take your time, use premium quality chemicals specifically designed for leather, and charge accordingly. To safely clean leather, it is easiest to use a product that is designed specifically for that. The concern with leather cleaning is that the pH of the cleaner must be such that it does not remove the leather's natural oils, or the dyes that are used to color the leather. Heavy stains, especially those that are oil-based, are impossible to remove without causing some damage to the leather. Explain this to the customer who is questioning why a pen mark or other stain will not come out. Do not use coarse brushes to scrub leather. Instead, use a terry-covered sponge or a hogs/horse-hair brush to agitate the cleaning solution. Then wipe with a clean, dry cloth. Mist the leather with a spray bottle containing clean water and wipe with clean, dry cloth. Then massage in a premium quality leather conditioner

containing natural oils and a UV screen. (Other than wear and tear due to normal use, ultraviolet rays are the number one cause of deterioration of leather.)

In conclusion, remind the customer that regular and proper care of the vehicle's plastic, vinyl, leather, and rubber surfaces will not only keep them looking new, but also extend their life.

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