

## MICROFIBER

# The Futuristic Fabric

*Just as few years ago, microfiber was a foreign notion. It has since taken hold in the United States, and the industry is recognizing its benefits*

By Becky Mollenkamp

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The jan/san industry isn't known as a hotbed of revolutionary ideas or cutting-edge technology. In recent years, however, one new advancement has changed the way people clean. Microfiber tools promise to work faster, better, more cost efficiently and with less environmental impact than their traditional counterparts.

"It's the latest true innovation in the cleaning market," says Bruno Niklaus, vice president of global marketing for Unger Enterprises Inc., Bridgeport, Conn.

Microfiber was invented in Sweden in the mid-1980s and quickly spread throughout Europe and Asia. Environmentally aware Europeans liked that the material could be used with little or no chemicals and could be repeatedly laundered, reducing waste. Microfiber flat mops now represent half of all mop sales in Europe's commercial cleaning market, says Frank Zoche, vice president of sales and marketing for FilMop US Distribution, Villa del Conte, Italy. They could render traditional string mops practically obsolete within a decade.

The technology finally leapt across the pond about five years ago but has only recently found acceptance stateside. When Chris Schran, president of REDCO, Fountain Valley, Calif., attended the 2001 ISSA trade show, there were about seven booths with microfiber products and all were in the international area.

"Last year there had to be 35 to 40 manufacturers or brands that had microfiber in their inventory and I'm sure this year it will be even more," Schran says.

It is clear that microfiber is a hit. Sales doubled in the first half of 2005, Zoche says, and industry professionals predict that microfiber mop sales will surpass string mop sales by nearly 30 percent in the next five years.

"It is tough to say where it is headed, but it is here to stay," says Mark Pendergrass, market manager for professional cleaning products at Norton Abrasives, Worcester, Mass. "There is more competition on the production side of microfiber, forcing the pricing down to a level where all segments can get a quality product at any budget level."

## Hit and Miss

The technology is used in many industries, including fashion, auto and aircraft. The

cleaning industry is still a very small part of the microfiber business, but one market segment that has widely accepted microfiber is healthcare. Hospitals appreciate the quality, ease of use and reduced waste associated with microfiber, says Judy Cline, director of microfiber cleaning for Rubbermaid, Winchester, Va.

“The way it is being used prevents cross contamination, which is ideal in this day and age when cleaning for health is such a high-profile concept,” Cline says.

Hospitals and nursing homes often use a different microfiber cloth for each patient room, laundering them between uses. Most also use color-coded handles to designate separate mops for restrooms, patient rooms, cafeterias, etc.

“Microfiber has not received this type of enthusiasm in other markets,” says Bland Murphy, account manager for Jones Yarn, Humboldt, Tenn. “However, microfiber could be very advantageous to any type of facility.”

The intensifying spotlight on indoor air quality (IAQ) finally has the educational market looking into microfiber. The technology is perfect for food service because it can be used where chemicals cannot, such as on sneeze guards near food. Another group that is showing interest are contract cleaners.

“They use it to differentiate themselves from the others,” Schran says. “They can provide better service because it’s easier to get in and out of places. They don’t go in with mops and buckets. They go in with a couple of spray bottles, cloths, a handle and a backpack vacuum. They are in and out quickly and it’s really clean.”

The group that seems most reluctant to jump on board the microfiber trend is large contractors. Their hesitance may be due to a lack of education about the forms and quality of microfiber products available.

“If they understood the technology and what it could do for them I think a lot more companies would use it,” Schran says.

### **Form and Function**

The most relevant microfiber products for the cleaning industry are mops, cloths, mitts and bonnets. Manufacturers promise that, in every form, microfiber outperforms its traditional counterparts thanks to its unique construction.

Microfiber yarn has 100 times more surface area than natural textiles. It is dense with lots of nooks and crannies, allowing it to hold seven to eight times its own weight in water. While cotton can absorb about 70 percent of moisture, microfiber can pick up about 98 percent. The synthetic material agitates better, weighs less and can be laundered more than traditional fibers.

“In every instance, in every form, microfiber will always clean better than its counterpart,” Cline says. “I recently cleaned an entire glass mirrored wall, using just a

microfiber cloth dampened with water. There were no streaks or prints. It just takes everything off.”

Just as there are important differences between microfiber and traditional cleaning tools, there are also variations within the microfiber category. “Microfiber is not just microfiber,” Niklaus says.

Unger recently released a microfiber grading system to help users understand differences. Distributors should familiarize themselves with those differences. In addition to price, learn about fiber density, durability, absorbency and wash life. Also, it is important that cloths used for dusting be 100 percent microfiber, while those used for mopping should actually be about a 50/50 blend of microfiber and polyester.

### **Seeing Is Believing**

The benefits of microfiber are numerous but telling customers this isn’t enough, particularly with end users who are resistant to change. The best way to persuade customers is through demonstration. Cline says a side-by-side comparison of traditional and microfiber tools is as good as “a white glove test.”

“Have them clean their floors as they would normally do it,” she says. “Following that, take a dry, white microfiber pad over the floor. It’s scary; it cleans so much better, and it will pick up the residue from traditional cleaning.”

Involve frontline workers in testing. They will respond quickly to better performance and will also appreciate ergonomic differences. A wet string mop can weigh 10 pounds, while a soaked microfiber mop with an aluminum head and handle weighs less than three pounds.

### **At a Price**

Even after testing, customers may express sticker shock, so distributors must help them see the long-term benefits.

Microfiber can be laundered and reused and, depending on the quality, can last several years. The highest quality cotton mops, on the other hand, must be replaced every few weeks and some cheap mops are practically disposable. The new technology also significantly reduces chemical usage. An average worker uses 21 gallons of floor-cleaning solution for string mopping during one shift, Murphy says. With microfiber, that is reduced to just two gallons — a 90 percent savings in cost and waste. Finally, microfiber tools increase productivity.

“If you can improve your productivity anywhere from 10 to 50 percent, that’s huge savings and it more than offsets the costs that people are always so freaked by,” Schran says.

## Handle With Care

As with any new technology, microfiber comes with a learning curve. The most common problems people have with the product are in the areas of technique and laundering. Here are a few tips on how to get it right.

- **Technique**

Dusting should be done totally dry — that means no water or dust-treating chemicals. When it comes to wet mopping, people often overload the microfiber cloth or pad with water or chemical. This will cause streaking.

“If all the crevices of the cloth are filled with chemical or water then there’s no place for dirt to go,” says Chris Schran, president of REDCO, Fountain Valley, Calif. “People totally over-wet the cloth and try to use them like a traditional rag. You don’t need to do that — it takes very little moisture.”

Once a mop is removed from the bucket, it should not go back in. Keeping dirty and clean mops separate will prevent streaking and cross contamination.

Also, be sure to start cleaning at the door or highest traffic area.

Microfiber mops release solution when pressure is applied and, if you start opposite the door, you’ll have little solution left by the time you reach the high-traffic area.

“When cleaning with pre-charged microfiber mops, the correct procedure is to start at the door, drag the mop across room releasing a path of cleaning solution, then mop back and forth,” says Frank Zoche, vice president of sales and marketing for FilMop US Distribution, Villa del Conte, Italy.

“With each progression back you pick up and re-distribute cleaning solution until you’re back at the door.”

- **Laundering**

One of the biggest benefits of microfiber is that it can be washed hundreds of times — if it is done correctly. As a synthetic, microfiber needs to be laundered at appropriate temperatures. Manufacturers recommend they be tumbled dry on a cool setting.

“There is a tendency to want to fry them instead of dry them,” says Judy Cline, director of microfiber cleaning for Rubbermaid, Winchester, Va. “Turning on too much heat will cause shrinkage.”

Wash only with like materials. The lint of cotton and other fibers will gunk up

microfiber. Finally, the most important thing to remember is to never wash microfiber with bleach or fabric softener. These chemicals will damage the polyamide fiber and reduce the magnetic effects.

“If you do two things — buy the right microfiber for the application and maintain it correctly — then you are on the right track,” says Bruno Niklaus, vice president of global marketing for Unger Enterprises Inc., Bridgeport, Conn. —*B.M.*

*Becky Mollenkamp is a Des Moines, Iowa-based freelance writer, and a frequent contributor to SM.*