

OXYGEN CLEANERS

Oxygen Imitation: The Sincerest Form of Flattery

More competition means more business in the oxygen cleaner arena

By Seiche Sanders

It seems everyone has jumped on the “oxi-cleaner” bandwagon recently.

But maybe that’s a good thing.

Peroxide, oxygen or “oxygen bleach” cleaners made a splash in the industry just a few years ago. Since then, dozens of manufacturers — on the consumer as well as institutional and industrial sides — have rolled out their own versions of the popular product. Imitation, however, seems to be not only the sincerest, but also the most lucrative, form of flattery.

There will always be companies that want to capitalize on a good thing, says Tim Trottier, vice president of sales and marketing for Oxygon Technologies Inc., London, Ontario. And that resulting impetus might be the most significant market driver for this product category.

“There are more oxi-type products being introduced in the retail trade, and as it grows in retail, institutional customers are going to be more aware and they’re going to start looking for those types of products from janitorial distributors,” Trottier says. “Retail is going to help the institutional end of the business.”

John Vlahakis, vice president of sales and marketing for Venus Laboratories, headquartered in Wood Dale, Ill., agrees that consumer

awareness and demand has been a boon to the commercial, industrial and institutional markets, driving more manufacturers to produce oxygen-type products.

“Their customers are coming to them looking for the same type of products. All manufacturers and distributors are constantly looking for new product opportunities. When you see a product category exploding, why not take advantage of that?” he asks.

Countless Applications

H₂O₂ is the scientific name for hydrogen peroxide, the active ingredient in oxygen cleaners. It is a naturally occurring water-like liquid having many practical applications, including in the cleaning industry. Hydrogen peroxide is made up of two hydrogen atoms and two oxygen atoms, and looks like water (H₂O), but its extra oxygen molecule makes it a powerful oxidizer, useful on organic materials. Possible applications include hard-floor surfaces (grout and tile), carpet and fabrics, laundry, and various other areas that require spot and stain removal.

Manufacturers have taken this naturally occurring, versatile and environmentally friendly compound and used it to create laundry additives, pre-sprays and stain removers, multi-

purpose cleaners, odor-control products and carpet cleaners, and more.

While the main ingredient, hydrogen peroxide, defies modification, both the products it’s used in, and the formulations and applications, have seen a fair amount of change since the products first became popular. Each industry manufacturer has a different approach to marketing as well as what they see as their product’s biggest selling points.

Patrick Stewart, president of EnvirOx, based in Danville, Ill., says his company is focused on providing his customers with a wide range of environmentally preferable products to handle various applications.

Besides its hydrogen peroxide-based multi-purpose products, the company offers other products that augment the base system, including a peroxide-based carpet care system that cleans without residue, a peroxide-based petroleum soils removing product, a product that removes hard water and iron stains from surfaces, and an environmentally preferable disinfectant.

“Our focus is to give our customers the ability to remove all of the elevated toxics in their facilities. Our concentrates are designed to do general cleaning, but there are soils that you need to have augmented systems for,” says Stewart.

Oxygon Technologies has been successful in moving from a powdered product to a liquid, stabilized, ready-to-use version, Oxyspray. Trottier says it saves labor, and it's also easy to use.

"Conventional hydrogen peroxide products have directions that say spray, scrub and extract. Our instructions are to spray onto the stain, and walk away. As the product evaporates, the stain disappears," he says.

"The other advancement is we have zero VOCs (volatile organic compounds) in our product," he adds.

Vlahakis' company also plays up its products' environmentally friendly features.

"Our positioning is that we're putting out a more natural product than the competitors. We're taking a more environmental slant," he says.

"We're 100 percent active product," he continues. "Other companies are using filler, and also from a price standpoint, we're very competitive — a little more bang for the buck."

David Stone, vice president of sales and marketing for Mississauga, Ontario-based Oxi Brite Inc., says when he goes up against market leaders, he focuses on his products' price. Founded in 2001, Oxi Brite sells to retail stores and private-label accounts.

Stone says the retail market leaders have high price points because of their name recognition. His company's challenge, he says, is getting customers to realize that the products' formulations are basically the same. His challenge is overcoming strong brand loyalty — once people try it and like it, they're reluctant to experiment with other brands.

A Safe Bet

The popularity of oxygen cleaners goes hand in hand with their inherent environmental friendliness as more facilities convert to those principles and products.

Stewart's company, EnvirOx, found a way to capitalize on the industry's desire for environmentally friendly products when the company began as a

research project in 1995-1996.

"Our premise was that we believed that the janitorial industry was under-regulated relative to the rest of the chemical industry. Essentially, we spent three years going after two goals: structurally reducing the toxicity without losing effectiveness and reducing the number of products needed," he says. "We were not able to accomplish these goals with conventional chemicals, and that eventually led us to oxygen."

EnvirOx's product is also the first and only hydrogen-peroxide based product to be registered with EPA as a hard surface sanitizer-virucide, Stewart says.

Although the products are relatively safe, adds Vlahakis, cleaning professionals still need to use care when working with these products.

"There still needs to be some education about protecting oneself in heavy industrial applications," he says.

Misconceptions

While oxygen cleaners are relatively easy to use, as with any product, incorrect use can cause damage to surfaces, or produce poor results.

As with all products, following directions is best way to get the most out of a product.

"They have to read directions and follow them properly for the product to work well," explains Trottier. "Even though our directions are 'spray and walk away,' we still have cleaners that scrub and blot, and by doing this, you actually remove some of the active ingredients."

"One of the common misconceptions is that hydrogen peroxide will bleach out fabric or carpet and upholstery," says Trottier. "If you have an un-stabilized or raw chemical, yes, you'd probably bleach it out because it wouldn't be neutralized. They don't understand that the technology has advanced to where the products have become stable and I guess a good way to describe a pH of 8.5 percent is it's active enough to attack the stains and odors, without doing damage."

"Generally speaking, it's a new technology, and anytime you have a new technology, there's a lot of confusion about what it is and what it isn't," Stewart says. "It has strengths and weaknesses. For instance, it's not very good at removing minerals, but if your customers don't know that, they'll try to use it and find it doesn't work very well.

"To handle these issues, you need to know your product and make sure customers know what it can't do as well as what it can do," Stewart adds. "Don't sell it like it's a panacea."

Oxygen Explodes

The manufacturers *SM* spoke to identified a number of trends that will affect the future of oxygen product sales.

For instance, for many years, each cleaning task involved a separate cleaning chemical. While those agents get the job done, it's cumbersome to order, store, warehouse and ship so many products. Plus, end users need to be trained on each one. Stewart says oxygen cleaners' benefits can address many cleaning challenges, often in one product.

Stewart also points to the movement toward health, safety and concern for the environment as a driver of oxygen technology.

"Just like quality in an organization is a profitable thing to concentrate on, the health, safety and environment is a profitable thing to concentrate on."

There's also no doubt among manufacturers that the oxygen craze is far from over.

"I see [the market] growing quite rapidly over the next three to five years," says Trottier.

For more information about the industry, log-on to the Sanitary Maintenance magazine website at www.cleanlink.com.

For more information about H2Orange2, log-on to the EnvirOx website at www.h2orange2.com