

BUYER BEWARE

Evaluating the Claims of Mold Remediation Products

As an instructor for a number of mold remediation courses and other specialized training related to contaminant control and environmental problems, I often receive questions in class regarding specific products and processes that are advertised to the cleaning and restoration industry. Although I do not claim by any stretch of the imagination to be an expert in all areas of our industry—from rug cleaning to water and fire loss restoration to environmental remediation—I do spend a lot of time reviewing products and advertising material in an effort to incorporate the best ideas into our programs.

I balance this desk research with conversations with hundreds of people in our industry: scientists, consultants, manufacturers, contractors, and workers. As such, I believe that I get a pretty good cross-section of information related to equipment and supplies that are offered to cleaning and restoration contractors. Over the years, this growing base of information and experience has allowed me to help many individuals more objectively evaluate advertising claims before they purchase a particular item.

Chemical Advertisements Make Some Incredible Claims

Although advertising for any equipment or product can be prone to hyperbole (or flat out misrepresentation) chemical products offered to the restoration industry seem to be the class of products with the most outrageous claims. To illustrate, I'll share an exchange I recently had with a contractor. This e-mail conversation was prompted by an advertisement and follow-up call that the contractor had received regarding a new product for cleaning mold. Following the dictum of the old *Dragnet* TV show, the names have been eliminated to protect the innocent—and, in this case, the guilty, as well. The following sections have my comments in regular type and statements taken directly from the product advertisement in italics.

Some General Advice

Some background information on my approach to specific product inquiries is appropriate. As implied above, I am blessed with the ability to translate fairly technical concepts into layman's terms. I have also trained myself to look at things from both a technical and common sense perspective.

I am not a chemical phobia person. I believe that chemicals and other emerging technology have an important place in our industry. However, evaluating a product must be done on several

levels: effectiveness as measured in the laboratory, effectiveness as demonstrated in the field, and value as defined by the ratio of cost to overall benefit. Sometimes a fourth factor needs to be added in: does the industry standard of care support the use of the new product or technique, or is it so far ahead of the curve that liability concerns must be built into the equation until the industry adapts its standard protocols?

With that background let us look in detail at a few sections of the advertisements that the contractor forwarded to me and address specific claims or statements. Please note that the spelling, abbreviations, use of bold type, and other journalistic miscues in the italicized type are there because it is an exact copy from the advertisement. Certain sections of the advertisement were further highlighted with blue and red type, although I have eliminated that extravagance here in order to avoid the hassle of having to deal with that bad attempt at marketing glitz.

Black Mold is such a major problem and as you know...Bleach doesn't do anything but mask the problem. Some truth here, but most trained professionals already avoid bleach for mold remediation except when they are trying to remove stains. So, comparing the new product to bleach is more of a bait-and-switch tactic than an effective advertising method.

These airborne spores gather strength through the air and resurface on an adjacent wall, etc. This is not just bad science—it's voodoo science that really makes me suspicious of the product. Spores are dormant as they move through the air and only germinate after they land on a hospitable surface with appropriate moisture.

*I represent a product that was formulated for the **US Defense Dept.** and is now sold privately. Lately, I have been contacted by Sherwin Williams and Lowes as this is the **only** product that kills Black Mold at a rate of 99.99999% and yet is bleach/alcohol free and safe for the environment.* It's hard to gauge the accuracy of a number of these statements without digging deeper, but most respectable manufacturers are reluctant to banter around potential client names until a deal is finalized; so, the Sherwin Williams and Lowes references sound like an attempt at credibility by association even though the product may not be on their store shelves. Also, any advertisement that uses five decimal places on statistics is just trying to impress the uneducated. And then we might as well throw in the "safe for the environment" comment since that's the buzzword of our industry these days. If it kills mold it cannot be safe for the environment because fungal organisms are part of the environment.

*When I say we kill mold, that refers to ALL mold-no matter what kind and esp. Black Mold! The product kills the mold spores **and also the seeds** this is the reason why the mold will not comeback through the airborne spores.* A number of things in these statements are a dead giveaway that the person who put this advertisement together does not understand our industry, basic science, or, probably, their own product. The scary red type and bold sections are designed

to ramp up the emotions rather than the intelligence. I wonder if anyone associated with this product understands that the mold spores *are* the "seeds" of the fungal organism. Since spores are dormant while they are in the air they can't really be killed because they are not living. That is why legitimate cleaning product companies use the term denature, which indicates that you are damaging the shell of the spore, preventing it from germinating.

*This product has been tested and I have all of the data and literature that you would need to know to be sold on the product. The talks are continuing with the above mentioned, but they both are requesting rights that prohibit companies, like yourself, from being able to purchase through anybody but themselves making the product not as cost effective for the smaller mold remediation companies. Not to mention Home Depot lurking because this product is **EPA Approved and Registered!** This is a classic come-on. Better buy it fast before somebody else takes it from you! If they cannot sell the product on its merits rather than on fear, I am even more suspicious.*

I would be happy to contact a representative of your company via phone, email or at your facility. It will be a short period of time before a "big box" company is selling this product with sole rights. All companies that are on board prior to that agreement will be grandfathered out of the agreement. As noted above, more emotion-based advertising: you better buy it now—no time to find out if this stuff really works. Buy a few barrels that will sit in your warehouse for years while the distributor makes money, something like a Ponzi scheme.

I'd like nothing more than to be able to show you the capabilities of this product that destroy Black Mold and all airborne spores...Eliminate the problem, not allowing it to return. Our Gov. uses this product against Anthrax with our first responders...it can do a lot more than Bleach and a new coat of paint. The use of abbreviations throughout the advertisement to give it a homey touch is kind of cute. Our government also uses napalm, but I don't think it is appropriate for mold remediation. Based on what I have seen from this advertisement I would not be much convinced to try it.

Buyer Beware

As this little exercise illustrates, people can, and do, make the most incredible claims about their products. They try to use modern marketing methods to manipulate the emotions and gloss over facts with pseudo-scientific statements that may sound impressive to someone who does not have much technical training. Rather than falling prey to sophisticated marketing techniques and unsubstantiated hype, restoration and cleaning contractors owe it to their organizations and their customers to do real research on products and equipment before they buy. Such efforts should include a review of advertising literature with a critical eye, discussion about potential purchases with other professional colleagues and knowledgeable technical experts, and small-scale

purchases so that product performance can be substantiated in the field before a major outlay of funds.

About the Author

Michael A. Pinto currently serves as Chief Executive Officer of Wonder Makers Environmental, Inc. He has more than 30 years of safety and environmental experience from jobs in the private sector, the non-profit arena, and regulatory agencies. Michael is the author of five books, including Fungal Contamination: A Comprehensive Guide for Remediation, over 150 published articles, and 18 commercial training programs. He can be reached at map@wondermakers.com.

This article was published in the March 2010 issue of *Cleaning and Restoration* magazine.