

## Keeping tents in top condition

### Cleaning and checking the vinyl are keys to preserving product

BY WHITNEY CARNAHAN

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Maintenance is a small word for a big job and training employees on this wide-ranging topic is nothing less than a stress test of the worst kind. However, it is an important task to tackle.

What makes maintaining tents so difficult is their need for a wide expanse of space and their unseemingly delicate nature. Grass and dirt can cause stains, asphalt can cause pinholes and simple water can cause mold. Sharp edges are vinyls mortal enemy, creating holes that require patching.

The main solution for these holes and stains is a few run-of-the-mill phrases those whose companies rent tents like to utter when asked for advice:

- "Don't get it dirty in the first place."
- "Always use a dropcloth."
- "Keep vinyl dry."

Maintaining tents also is about checking and fixing obvious defects, but it is more than just the tent fabric. Maintenance for a tent installation is required in all areas, from communicating with customers and ensuring proper anchoring to inspecting structural soundness of all parts of the tent. It includes storage methods and site preparation, including soil, potential obstructions, overhead wires and potential temperature changes. Also, maintenance is important to the equipment used to deliver and install the tent.

"After each installation the overall condition of our tent products, such as the tops, walls and poles, are checked upon return from every event," Michael Miner, vice president, marketing/strategic accounts, Classic Party Rentals, Los Angeles, says. "Each tent is inspected over a light table to search for and repair any imperfections. Solid quality control means constantly cleaning and inspecting our tenting."

Alex Kouzmanoff, national sales manager, Aztec Tents, Torrance, Calif., says other elements that need to be checked include framing and tie-downs. "Any signs of cracking, breaking, bending or any other structural damage would render that component unusable," he says. "Often tie-downs are used for purposes other than holding down tents which they should not be and the strapping or rope can be damaged. Webs and ropes are susceptible to UV (ultraviolet) degradation and are affected by contact with petroleum products, which speed up the aging process of the material. These items should be inspected prior to each use. Any type of fraying, tearing or damage should result in disposal of the item."

"All webbing, ropes, stitching, seams, buckles and snaps should be checked to make sure all are serviceable and not in need of any repairs," says Gary Sank, director of sales, Celina Enterprises/Celina Tent, Celina, Ohio. "Stakes should be straight and all ropes or ratchet straps should be in good condition with no fraying or loose stitching. Ratchet buckles should be lubricated and checked to make sure they are not broken, jammed or unserviceable."

On the way down, everything needs to be checked again. "Fabric should be inspected or graded upon dismantle to know its condition for the next rental," says Mike Holland, vice president of operations, Chattanooga Tent Co., Chattanooga, Tenn. "Visual inspection of all parts should happen while the tent is being loaded. At the end of the rental season, cast parts and connections should be inspected for cracks or fatigue."

Gary Mertens, Tentwares, Manchester, N.H., says another area to check is steel welds on aluminum frames, to make sure they are not rusting. "To me, the best time to check and have a tent condition report is when you're taking a tent down. If it needs major repair, it shouldn't go up again until it's completed. If your webs or ropes are worn, they should be replaced. Your winches should be lubricated. Check where frames are connected. If it's cracked, it should be replaced. If you see splits in the end of the aluminum pieces, it should be repaired or replaced," he says.

Gary Hallam, tent rental manager, Colorado Party Rentals, Denver, agrees and says mold prevention starts when the tent is broken down. "A must to look out for when striking a tent is moisture. Every tent company's worst enemies are water and wind. A good portion of the worry of having mold ruin your expensive wedding-quality tent has been depleted with the invention of mold-resistant fabrics, but there are no guarantees with this technology. Over time, inevitably some of your older inventory may not be mold resistant."

"When tents come down, if they are in need of washing or repair, it is noted and action is taken," says Steve Kohn, president, Millers Rentals and Sales, Edison, N.J. "All tents are stored on pallets in a rack system, so no vinyl is left on the ground. That is an easy way to pick up moisture and cause staining on the product. Any tent taken down wet is hung to dry in the warehouse before storing."

"We suggest wiping down tents with a mild detergent and drying them completely before storage," says Steve Lipking, northeast sales representative, Anchor Industries, Evansville, Ind. "All aluminum poles should be checked for secure pole pins. If pins seem loose, they should be tightened. Wood poles need to be evaluated for signs of splitting or splintering. Check all stake drivers, stake pullers and other installation equipment for optimum performance. Review all clear vinyl sidewalls or window walls to see if they should be replaced before the next season or cleaned."

Kouzmanoff agrees. "Patch rips, cuts and tears before they expand and cause further damage. With your hardware, especially hardware that comes in contact with the fabric, wipe it clean before use to prevent transfer to the fabric once the fabric is installed," he says.

"For poles, we will periodically scrape and use a solvent to clean the tape residue from the surface," Hallam says. "Some other accessories that need attention in the off-season include lights, sandbag weights and just basic warehouse organization, which is usually in a shambles after a busy summer season. These are all good projects to help keep the winter crew busy."

Jim Reyen, national sales and marketing manager, Eureka! Tent, Binghamton, N.Y., adds that maintenance needs for installing tents should not be limited to the product, and should apply to "the equipment being used to install the tent and the vehicles required to deliver the product. Any area or component that is exposed to considerable loads or wear and tear should be inspected on a regular basis. This includes frame fittings, tent jacks, pole fittings and others."

Storage plays a large part in tent maintenance, especially in seasonal areas. There are various methods of storing tents, including bags, barrels and crates.

At Millers Rentals, "all tents are stored in color-coded bags when not being used," Kohn says. "Ends go in solid color bags and middles go in bags with stripes. For example, 20-ft.-wide series tents have solid green bags for ends and white with green stripes for middles."

Other operations use crating. "To lengthen the life of our tents, we store them in custom-made weather-tight boxes, use dropcloths at the job site and properly tag them to avoid additional handling," Miner says.

"All vinyl tops should be neatly folded/rolled for storage and kept clean and dry to prevent mold and mildew and prolong the life of the tent," Sank says. "It also is best that vinyl products not be exposed to extreme cold to prevent cracking."

Sarek Raeburn, sales manager, NTI Global, Amsterdam, N.Y., suggests to not fold the sidewalls in the same place every time, either.

"Repeatedly folding and transporting the sidewalls in the same pattern allows for stress cracking to occur prematurely," he says, adding that rental owners must think about sunlight and changing temperatures as well.

"Store the sidewalls in a cool, dry and shaded area. Avoid areas close to doors and windows where condensation can accumulate. Avoid areas with direct sunlight. Unnecessary and extended UV exposure can cause colors to fade and whites to yellow," he says.

**Cold tent storage** Cold tent storage requires special handling. "Tents should be rolled to avoid sharp, hard folds, especially in sub-zero temperatures. Sharp folds are more likely to crack when the material gets cold," says Michael Tharpe, sales and marketing director, TopTec Products, Laurens, S.C.

"Avoid direct contact with the cement or asphalt floor. Place your tent tops on pallets allowing air circulation between the floor and the tent bag. The ideal situation would have the tents placed onto pallets and then into some type of racking system. At the very least, put down a waterproof tarp on the floor, then put the tents on top of it. This will prevent moisture from wicking into the tent bag," he says.

Temperature also can affect tent storage, depending on climate. "If storing over the winter, avoid moving the tents if at all possible," Tharpe adds. "Do not move them if the storage area is less than 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4.5 degrees Celsius). Once you bring them out of storage, allow them to sit overnight in a warm room 60 degrees Fahrenheit (15.6 degrees Celsius) before removing them from their storage bag."



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