

Run from rayon rugs

Your mission may be to clean up the world.
You can make it easier by avoiding a certain fiber type.

By Lisa Wagner, CRS



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There are several names for rayon rugs: Rayon, art (artificial) silk, faux silk, and viscose. Those are the industry names.

Here are several words that I use for rayon rugs: Cheap, crummy, problematic, and perhaps the worst rugs on the planet.

But how do I really feel about them?

Why rayon is a bad rug fiber

In terms of durability, there is a very good reason why wool is the fiber of choice for rugs.

In strength tests, as you learn in your rug cleaning certification courses, it takes more than 10,000 "bends" to break a wool fiber.

Silk isn't too shabby either, breaking after 2,500.

Rayon? It breaks after only 70 bends.

Now, I'm not a rocket scientist, but if I were to create a rug to be trampled on by foot traffic on a daily basis, which fiber would I choose?

I'd own an olefin rug before I would a rayon one!

So why would manufacturers choose to use rayon in rugs? One reason is that it's dirt cheap.

Rayon (viscose) is chemically processed, regenerated cellulose parts that are made to look nice and shiny. Think of it as cotton sausage... you don't really want to know how it's made.

Rayon looks like silk at a fraction of the cost of silk, and at a fraction of the lifespan.

This means retailers can sell rayon rugs for a pretty penny, and the consumer ends up with a rug they sometimes think is actually silk because of the price, and a rug that will never look as good as it did on their first day of owning it.

In many situations when I discuss "rugs to run from", I point out that there will be challenges with some of those rugs.

In this case with rayon, this is not a "some" discussion, but a *most* one. Most rayon rugs will create problems for you.

Let's discuss the areas to be wary of, with rug precautionary measures and tips to keep you out of rayon trouble.

Fiber fading and dye loss

Rayon rugs like to bleed, and they like to fade.

It's just the way they are.

Also, because they are "cotton" material, they absorb soil like nobody's business, and it can be very difficult to see pre-existing dye migration ("bleeding") or sun fading.

Rug precautionary measures: Flip the rug over to note the difference between the vibrancy of the back side to the front.

On the back, you want to focus on any field designs to see if any dyes have moved into those areas (it's often easier to identify existing dye bleed on the back).

You also want to "grin" open the fibers from the front side to note if the tips of the fibers show existing loss of color due to sun fade or past cleaning.

It is very important to note all problems in writing with the client before you clean the rug, and to photograph all areas of concern.

Tips to minimize color loss

- **Always test the dyes:** If it is this rug's very first wash, and the dye transfer during your test is significant, you want to consider passing up this job. We will put in writing that this rayon rug will bleed despite our best efforts due to the inferiority of the fiber, and if



"Grin" open the fibers to view the entire fiber shaft. Tips of rayon fibers may lose color due to sun fading or previous cleaning.

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Grooming the rug

If the rug is dry, and stiff, the next step is to groom it by hand. I use a handheld spotting brush with stiff nylon fibers.

Some cleaners use a carding brush. While I will use a carding brush for real silk (because silk is strong), I prefer the softer bristles for rayon grooming.

Determine the grain of the face fibers. Just as with your pet, you can tell when you are petting against the grain of his fur, and petting *with* the grain. The rug has a similar grain. When you are going with the grain, this leads you to the bottom end of the rug. This is the end that the weaver began weaving first. (With these low-grade rayon “fake silk” or blends, you will see the tell-tale folded over-ends as you can see in the photo in this article.)

I start at the top end of the rug, at the left side, and slowly brush up slowly against the grain of the face fibers about a foot.

Just like how the Karate Kid painted that wall, I brush up one stroke against the grain, then move right beside that first stroke and brush right beside it.

When the fibers are brushed this way they look darker, so I create a big dark stripe from one side to the other.

Once I’ve completed one complete “dark” section, I come back and brush *with* the grain to make the whole section lighter again.

Then I move down to the next section and repeat the same steps again.

Brushing against the grain, and then with it, loosens the tension in the fiber and makes it soft again. You will create some shedding of staple fibers during this process, so vacuum the rug after it’s been brushed (I like to use a canister vacuum or an upholstery attachment so I am not making any marks with an upright beater bar vacuum on the rug.)

Roll the rug from the *bottom* end, as this will give you a nice tight roll to minimize pile distortion while it’s waiting to be opened in the home again.

— L.W.

rayon rug, it will not stay that way, so you will want to choose your battles carefully.

If the client is very picky, you may want to pick another client to serve who owns a wool rug.

Tips to minimize yellowing

- **Use an acid rinse:** An acidic rinse (such as acetic acid) will minimize cellulose yellowing/browning. One drawback here is that the dyes of this rug — because it is cotton — will be basic (rather than acid) and if you soak the rug in acid for an extended period you may cause it to bleed. So all of your steps with this rug must be quick, quick, quick.

- **Dry the rug flat and fuzzy side down:** This will concentrate any yellowing/browning to the back of the rug rather than the front. During subsequent years this will make the back of the rug very yellow, so it is important to explain to the client why this is happening (she bought a bad fiber).

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the client insists on us cleaning it we will only with a total release of liability.

- **Dry the rugs out flat and face down:** This is to minimize dye migration that may occur if the rug is hung to dry. Lessen the dry time by either surface cleaning rather than full immersion cleaning, and utilizing air movers and dehumidification to speed up the process.

Fiber yellowing

If you love yellow, then rayon rugs may become your new best friend!

We are talking about regenerated cotton parts — kind of like how sausage is made — so cellulose browning will occur during any wet cleaning.

In fact, it is not unheard of for a spill of plain water on a rayon rug to dry looking like a big pet urine stain.

Rug precautionary measures: Identify any pre-existing yellow areas before cleaning, and explain to your client the tendency of this fiber to yellow overall with time and with moisture.

If your client bought a pristine white

Circle ?

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Fiber shedding and flowering

As mentioned previously, rayon fibers are the weaklings of the rug world.

The fibers like to break, shed, and flower.

This makes spotting and scrubbing extremely dangerous activities.

In fact, if your client aggressively tried to wipe up a spill on a rayon rug, she will have distorted the fibers so much that her every move will be forever visible on the rug.

Rug precautionary measures: Note all areas of fiber loss and fiber pulls before the cleaning begins. Use your CSI-like rug inspection skills to identify any spills that have been “handled” by your client improperly.

Inform your client of the weakness of this fiber, and which steps you will be taking to be as gentle — and thorough — as possible with your cleaning.

Tips to minimize fiber loss

- **Be gentle:** You want to be very particular with your scrubbing and grooming so

that you do not create any scarring in the field. Using soft brushes during the cleaning (such as window washing brooms) rather than stiffer rotary scrubbers is generally a better choice.

- **Extract carefully:** If you do not have a wringer or centrifuge for water removal, consider using a glide or similar cover over your wand to minimize any agitation from your wand during extraction.

Fiber stiffness

As with real silk rugs, rayon rug fibers can become stiff and matted after the cleaning process.

You will also notice this in areas that the client has had spills, that the fibers have dried very stiff and flat.

The grooming step to lessen this stiffness takes some time and elbow grease, so you should be charging more for handling silk and these fake silk rayon rugs.

Rug precautionary measures: Make certain that you allow yourself time to properly groom



the rug after your normal cleaning routine. Whether you use a hand held soft brush, a carding brush, or a broom brush, make sure you have them available (and clean!)

Tips to minimize rug stiffness

- **Dry flat and face down:** In my experience, a thorough wet wash and acetic acid rinse gives rayon rugs a softer hand than a surface cleaning where residue left behind can contribute to a “stiffness” problem. Drying flat and face down can lessen this. It is important to brush the face fibers in the correct direction with a soft broom brush before you flip it over to dry (otherwise the pile will dry in weird directions and give the rug “bed head”).

- **A bit of fabric softener:** Some rug cleaners use a bit of fabric softener to mist on the rug to soften the surface tension of the fibers.

- **Slowly groom by hand:** After the rug is dry, slowly groom the rug by brushing slowly against the grain, and then with the grain of the fibers. (See “Grooming the rug” on page 37)

Protecting yourself and your client

There are not many rugs that I will tell a client to avoid, but rayon is the exception.

It is one of the rugs that will look worse after repeated cleanings and repeated traffic exposure.

And, because of the fading, wearing, and cleaning problems inherent in them, it is a rug that I would never recommend for a client to buy no matter what the intended use of the piece.

It has been my experience that most buyers of rayon rugs, or wool/viscose blends, have no idea that they have bought a “rug to run from.”

As the market begins to have more and more rayon, art silk, faux silk, and viscose rugs available, it is our responsibility to educate our clients so that they do not waste their hard earned dollars on low-quality merchandise.

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