

# The Strange Case of the Missing Microfiber

---

By [Barbara Flanagan](#) May 30, 2008 - [BRON](#)

It's green, it's healthful, and it works. So why is this cleaning textile practically shut out of the U.S. market?

It's a revolutionary product that's not causing a revolution. What gives?

By now, 15 years after a debut in Sweden and success throughout Europe, microfiber cleaning textiles should have replaced most of the household chemicals that smear, powder, spray, and infuse almost every inch of the American home. Microfiber cleans surfaces mechanically, not chemically, by scraping them with microscopic precision. And you don't throw the products away, but keep renewing them with machine or hand washing.

"It's one of the greenest products out there. From the research we've done, microfiber cleans and removes dirt and bacteria with water alone. You do not need chemicals," says Judy Klein, director of retail cleaning for Newell Rubbermaid, the \$6.4 billion corporation that in 2007 introduced a consumer line of microfiber cleaning products.

For the most part, though, disbelief has stunted microfiber's proliferation. The claims of chemical-free cleaning are too vast to trust and too complex to understand for the average consumer, and the products are too expensive to risk taking the chance. Because the term "microfiber" is not regulated, great products share the same labeling with poor ones, exacerbating the problem of trust.

It's one of the most fascinatingly unmarketable products I've ever seen.

My obsession with the stuff began three years ago, while I was doing online research for a book I was writing. I saw the term "microfiber" applied to a wide range of products claiming to dust, clean, polish, and even sanitize everything from eyeglasses to autos without chemicals. Their websites and infomercials were uniformly low-rent, and all used the same shifty prose: boilerplate that seemed to be misquoted from an inarticulate expert dozens of iterations ago. I checked Martha Stewart's supposedly canonical book *Homekeeping*, which was still praising rags and vinegar; nary a mention of microfiber. It was also absent from the EPA's

agenda, even as the organization dared to tell citizens to shun their light bulbs and buy compact fluorescents. (While to this day it doesn't "officially endorse" microfiber, the EPA's website does include a 2002 document, "Environmental Best Practices for Health Care Facilities," citing field tests done at a University of California-Davis hospital. The case study showed that while standard string mops needed 10.5 ounces of chemicals per day, microfiber mops needed half an ounce to clean sufficiently, and only that much because hospitals require more chemicals than homes do.)

I surmised that microfiber just might be the housekeeping version of homeopathy—gentle, no-brand, no-pill treatments being upstaged by Big Pharma. Microfiber was either a boon or a fraud, and I had to find out.

First and foremost, microfiber cleaning products proved to be suspiciously missing from the shelves of retailers, boutique to big box. At Grainger Industrial Supply, the contractor's catalog store, I finally found convincing microfiber tools, albeit commercial ones: a flat-head swiveling mop and 18-inch-wide microfiber pads, plus a big box of microfiber cloths, made by Newell Rubbermaid.

Over the next few months, I experimented on every surface in sight, and paid wary cleaning people to use damp microfiber textiles to wash my car, clean my house, and report back. My fellow cleaners were not happy; robbed of the sensory excitement of cleaning solutions—bright colors, heady fumes, sudsing, foaming, and definitive rinsing—everyone felt ineffective and disarmed. The rituals didn't feel right. But unquestionably, the stuff worked. Windows disappeared, floors gleamed, the Subaru sparkled.

I also realized that cleaning my house exclusively with microfiber would obliterate the costs and the storage space demanded by a massive array of task-specific chemicals and applicators I no longer needed. Once my cupboards were bare, I multiplied that emptiness times 100 million American households and wondered how the makers of household cleaners, paper towels, and disposable wipes would survive if microfiber ever really caught on. Would they help launch a new era of nearly chemical-free cleaning, or cling to their profits for dear life?

I asked them.

Several lines of questioning, repeated over the course of two months, via approximately 100 phone calls and countless emails, uncovered several facts. First, large makers of household chemicals are very, very hard to reach and are unwilling to reveal their ingredients for fear of piracy. Second, they're hell-bent on convincing customers to disinfect their premises using the strongest chemicals possible to annihilate bacteria and viruses, evidenced not just by the kind of products they sell and the scare tactics by which they're marketed, but also by the corporate refrain I heard over and over: Okay, maybe microfiber can remove germs, but it does not kill them.

(To disinfect or sanitize, technically one must kill 99.999 percent of microorganisms in 30 seconds.)

Never mind that removing germs is likely to be enough for the average homeowner, assuming he or she takes the time to wash the microfiber cloth properly afterward. Never mind that new university research finds that "safe" household chemicals are proving unhealthy now that so many of them are building up and mixing together inside our hyper-sealed homes, then draining outdoors. Never mind that more scientists are predicting the rise of superbugs as over-disinfecting threatens to create invincible strains of bacteria and viruses.

Spokespeople from Procter & Gamble, makers of Swiffer—that flat mop with chemically "pre-lotioned" disposable pads of cellulose—claimed they were "not really familiar with microfiber" and unaware of any P&G initiatives to promote chemical-free cleaning with such products. P&G—the country's fifth-largest company, with net sales of \$76.4 billion, \$36.2 billion of which qualify as "household care"—said they are serving their customers' desire for "convenience" and, most urgently, distance from the dirt.

As for the other famous makers of household cleaners, Clorox—which just introduced GreenWorks, the "first national brand of natural cleaning products"—emailed a statement verifying that they were, like "other cleaning product companies, actively evaluating microfiber...an interesting technology."

Meanwhile, SC Johnson, "a family company," managed to schedule no interviews in 40 days.

The observation that all company spokespeople confirmed, whether makers of disinfectant toilet-bowl cleaner or makers of microfiber, was quite a revelation: America loves its cleaning chemicals, and lots of them. We have a distinct cleaning culture. And as much as that culture makes us look stubborn, superstitious, underinformed, and overly aggressive, it's who we are.

That is, until we give up our addiction to sunny-lemon-pine-forest freshness.

Additional reporting by Deni Thurman-Eyer and Gregory Heller-Labelle