# Episode Book

EPISODE #5740

# Your Vacuum's Best Upgrade Is the Head

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## SYNOPSIS

When Daniel's toddler started crawling, he bought a vacuum in a hurry and regretted it. But then he discovered something most owners never do: the machine's suction is fixed, and the attachment is the lever. This episode digs into vacuum tool physics — why shrinking a nozzle increases air velocity while reducing volume, why shop vacs share a de-facto standard while Dyson and Miele lock you into proprietary connectors, and why a seven-dollar adapter can do what a premium accessory claims. We also cover the 30% usage gap, hose-length suction loss, and which heads are actually worth swapping.

# TRANSCRIPT



**Herman**

The head. Nobody ever talks about the head.



**Corn**

It's the most ignored appliance in the house. Everybody buys on wattage. Nobody thinks about what's on the end of the wand.



**Herman**

And the wattage number is basically marketing at this point.



**Corn**

Which is exactly what Daniel ran into. He wrote in this week. Since Ezra was born he's become a daily vacuumer. Fifteen months old, food goes everywhere, he's on the floor twice a day making sure nothing's sitting there that a toddler could put in his mouth. So when Ezra started crawling, it became urgent, and he did not do his usual deep research. Hannah pointed him at an appliance store, he bought a consumer machine, a couple hundred dollars, and he regrets it. Suction's weak. But he's making the best of it, and this is where it gets interesting. He says the suction is what it is, but once you know your nozzle diameter, the world is your oyster.



**Herman**

That's the leap.



**Corn**

He had this cobweb job at his in-laws' place. Basement workshop, beautiful room, and about a decade of accumulated cobwebs. Seemed impossible with the basic attachment. His father-in-law's got a Craftsman shop vac, the nozzle's a standard size, so Daniel goes on Amazon, gets a section of pipe that extends the thing a couple of metres, gets a crevice head, and suddenly it's trivial. Barely made a dent before. Trivial after.



**Herman**

Two metres of reach and one head.



**Corn**

Same machine. And his current reality is food dispersion events under tables, DIY dust from drilling, a bit of engraving for his inventory system, and he's taken to running a brush head across tabletops, which he says is good. So his conclusion is that the true expert vacuumer has a few different heads and swaps them masterfully around the house.



**Herman**

He's right, and it's the cheapest upgrade path in the entire appliance category.



**Corn**

So what actually comes in the box when you buy one of these things?



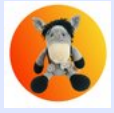
**Herman**

Three tools, minimum, and it's remarkably consistent across brands. Crevice tool, dusting brush, upholstery nozzle. That's the floor. Consumer Reports lists seven common attachments, airflow brush, crevice tool, hose attachment, dust brush, extension wand, floor brush, upholstery brush, but the actual minimum in the carton is those three.



**Corn**

And the cartons back it up.



**Herman**

They do. A Kenmore canister ships with the canister, the PowerMate, a crevice tool, a floor brush, the handle and hose assembly, a dusting brush, and an attachment holder. A Bissell Cleanview gives you the base, the handle, screws, a cord wrap, a hose wand clip, a TurboBrush, a dusting brush, the hose, a crevice tool that stores inside the extension wand, and the extension wand itself. Different machines, same skeleton.



**Corn**

So the crevice tool stores inside the wand, which is a nice trick, and it means people lose it less. Which is presumably the point.



**Herman**

It also means they never take it out. And here's the number that frames this whole episode. A retailer called Vacuums and More, thirty-five years at the service counter, estimates most customers use about thirty percent of their machine's capability. And their view is that standard kits cover eighty percent of household needs.



**Corn**

So you've got eighty percent coverage and thirty percent usage.



**Herman**

That gap is the whole story. It's not that the tools are missing. It's that nobody picks them up.



**Corn**

And what you get in the box tracks what you paid, not what you actually need to do. Budget models get friction-fit tools, the plain plastic push-on kind. Premium brands bundle motorized accessories, the pet hair brushes, the high-reach stuff, the delicate-surface tools.



**Herman**

Which is a weird way to sell a machine. You're buying a motored floor head and three pieces of plastic, and the plastic is doing half the work.



**Corn**

Here's where it gets interesting. The physics of why the head matters more than the machine.



**Herman**

Suction is a pressure difference. The fan lowers the pressure inside the machine, atmospheric pressure does the rest, air and dust get pushed in. That part is fixed at the factory. What you control is the aperture at the end of the hose.



**Corn**

And the intuition most people have is wrong. They think a smaller nozzle means less suction.



**Herman**

It doesn't, or not in the way they think. Shrinking the nozzle area does not reduce airflow proportionally. There's a thread on Physics Forums, from 2019, where a guy swapped a one and a quarter inch attachment for a quarter inch one. That's a twenty-five-fold area reduction. Less than four percent of the design airflow area. And his report was that it completes the task perfectly.



**Corn**

That's not a small change. That's a pinhole.



**Herman**

An advisor on that thread, cjl, put it plainly. The air velocity through the smaller nozzle will be much higher than through the large one. It will reduce flow rate somewhat as well, but the exact amount will depend both on the shape of the nozzle and the characteristics of the fan and motor.



**Corn**

So you trade total volume for speed.



**Herman**

You trade volume for speed. And for grabbing cobwebs, for lifting dust off a baseboard, speed is what you want. Volume is for a wide open floor pass where you're moving a lot of air across a big area.



**Corn**

The same thread has the counterargument, and it's the one I'd want people to hear.



**Herman**

Tom.G, another advisor. Be cautious about a major airflow restriction. The Shop-Vac motor needs good airflow for cooling. Been there, done that.



**Corn**

So you can kill the machine.



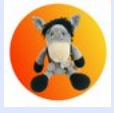
**Herman**

You can cook it. There's a second advisor, Baluncore, who notes that obstructing the airflow raises the pressure drop and the pump usually runs faster when it's obstructed, which makes motor cooling a real problem. The motor is working harder while getting less air across it.



**Corn**

Which is why the quarter-inch pinhole is a fun experiment and not a lifestyle.



**Herman**

It's the extreme end of a spectrum. And the honest framing is that a vacuum's performance is a three-number tradeoff, and Shop-Vac's own FAQ says so. Sealed pressure, measured in inches of water, that's raw suction. CFM, max airflow at the largest orifice, best for light material like dust. And air watts. Numbers above seventy-five inches are considered the high end of utility vacuums.



**Corn**

So when you choke the nozzle down, you're pushing yourself up the pressure axis and down the CFM axis.



**Herman**

And Dyson is doing this deliberately. Their crevice tool has a forty-five degree angled opening, and the whole design intent is to increase suction power as the tool moves into tighter spaces. They're not selling you a smaller tube. They're selling you a geometry that keeps increasing velocity as it goes into the gap.



**Corn**

Which is a very expensive way to solve a problem that a seven-dollar adapter also solves.



**Herman**

Differently. Not identically, but yeah.



**Corn**

So the physics says the head is the lever. Then you go to buy a head, and you hit the wall.



**Herman**

You hit the compatibility maze immediately. Household vacuums mostly use a universal thirty-two or thirty-five millimetre friction-fit system. Push on, twist, done. But the premium brands, Dyson, Shark, Miele, use proprietary clip-on and locking connectors, and those are not interchangeable across brands.



**Corn**

So the expensive machine is the one you can't buy cheap heads for.



### Herman

It's the classic razor-and-blades move. The retailer line from Vacuums and More is that you generally can't mix brands, each manufacturer uses different connection diameters and locking mechanisms, and an ill-fitting attachment creates air leaks that reduce suction. And they go further, they argue generic third-party attachments fit loosely, reduce suction, and can even damage the vacuum's wand.



### Corn

A dealer arguing you should buy the branded accessory.



### Herman

With a real mechanical basis. An air leak at the joint is a real loss. And a loose fit that whistles is annoying as anything.



### Corn

But then shop vacs are the opposite world. Daniel's Craftsman worked because shop vacs share a de-facto standard.



### Herman

They do. Shop-Vac hoses come in roughly one and a quarter, one and a half, or two and a half inches. The one and a quarter opening is about the size of a golf ball. The two and a half is about the size of a baseball. Ridgid accessories come in one and seven eighths and two and a half. So there's a small, well-understood set of sizes, and everybody builds to them.



### Corn

Which is why a guy in a basement with a fourteen-year-old Craftsman can go online and find a crevice head that fits.



**Herman**

And the adapters bridge the gap between the two worlds. Craftsman sells a two and a half to one and a quarter inch hose adapter. Shop-Vac sells a two and a half to one and a quarter conversion unit for about seven dollars sixty-nine. Centec sells a two and a half to one and a half ESD adapter that fits Ridgid, Shop-Vac, and Craftsman.



**Corn**

Seven dollars and sixty-nine cents.



**Herman**

That's the whole upgrade.



**Corn**

With one cost that people never factor in, and I like this one. Hose length costs you suction.



**Herman**

It does. The figure I've seen is that once you've added three hoses, around thirty-six feet, you're down twenty-one percent on suction. Every metre of tube is friction and leak surface.



**Corn**

Which is why Daniel's two-metre extension worked. Short enough that the loss is nothing, long enough that he's not standing on a stepladder with a shop vac under his arm.



**Herman**

That's the right instinct. Reach is worth buying. Absurd reach is not.



**Corn**

So if the physics says the head is the lever, what does the aftermarket actually offer?



**Herman**

The aftermarket is enormous and it's cheap. Amazon is saturated with universal multi-piece kits, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, twenty-five pieces, from brands like Seovmri, SEVNX, QRUIHC, BGSIME, CSKB, POWERTEC. The typical contents are multiple hose adapters, one inch, one and a quarter, one and three eighths, one and seven eighths, two and a half, so you can bridge basically anything. Then extension wands, a crevice tool, a flexible crevice tool, a horsehair dust brush, an upholstery nozzle, a utility nozzle with a brush, and a swivel floor brush.



**Corn**

Twenty-five pieces.



**Herman**

Most of which you won't use. But the two or three you will use are in there, and the kit costs less than a single branded replacement head.



**Corn**

Which is the actual deal. You buy the box to get the one piece you need.



**Herman**

POWERTEC's six-piece kit is a good example of a curated version. Stainless extendable wand, six foot hose with a two and a quarter inch adapter, swivel floor brush, a flexible crevice tool that's twenty-four and seven sixteenths inches long with a swivel head, and a dusting brush. That flexible crevice tool is the interesting one. It bends, so you can get behind a radiator or under a fridge without moving the fridge.



**Corn**

That's the product that doesn't exist in a standard kit.



**Herman**

It isn't. And Craftsman's own four-piece Home Essentials kit, the one and seven eighths version, has a floor brush with two bristle sizes, three eighths and five eighths, a wet floor nozzle with a rubber squeegee, a crevice tool, and a dusting brush. It also comes in the two and a half inch size. And they sell a flexible crevice tool separately.



**Corn**

So the same manufacturer that wants you to buy branded is also selling you the kit.



**Herman**

That's the thing about Craftsman and Shop-Vac and Ridgid. They're shop vac brands, and the shop vac world has always been modular, because a shop vac gets bought to do a job and the job determines the nozzle.



**Corn**

Whereas a household vacuum gets bought to be a household vacuum.



**Herman**

Right. The task-to-tool mapping is where this becomes useful. Cobwebs and high reach, an extension wand plus a tool. Consumer Reports is explicit that a wand plus tool lets you easily clean the corners of your ceiling where cobwebs collect. Adds eighteen to twenty-four inches of reach, which gets you crown molding, ceiling fan blades, high shelves.



**Corn**

So there's no dedicated cobweb attachment.



**Herman**

There isn't one as a named product category. The cobweb job is a combination. Extension wand plus a dusting brush or a crevice tool. That's it.



**Corn**

Which is worth saying out loud, because people hunt for the cobweb tool and it doesn't exist.



**Herman**

Crevices get the crevice tool, and that's the most underused tool in the box. Sofa cushions, baseboards, sliding door tracks, window sills, car seats. Vacuums and More calls it the most underused tool, which tracks with the thirty percent figure.



**Corn**

Tabletops get the dusting brush, which is what Daniel's doing. And there's actual design logic there.



**Herman**

There is. The bristles do two jobs. They agitate the dust off the surface, and they create a slight gap between the suction opening and the surface, so the attachment doesn't latch down and scratch a delicate finish. Miele uses natural bristles, which carry less static and are gentler on the thing you're cleaning.



**Corn**

So a brush head on a tabletop isn't a hack. It's the intended use, and most people just never do it.



**Herman**

Never occurs to them. DIY dust and workshop, Shop-Vac recommends a universal tool adaptor to attach the vac directly to a saw, so you're capturing dust at the cut instead of chasing it afterwards. Craftsman's dusting brush is specced to capture wood chips, metal shavings, and dust.



**Corn**

That's the case where the attachment stops being a cleaning tool and becomes part of the tool.



**Herman**

It's the difference between cleaning up after drilling and not having to. Pet hair and upholstery get the turbo brush or a mini motorized brush, air-driven turbine or electric. That's the single most impactful attachment for a pet owner, and it's the one the budget machines don't include.



**Corn**

And hard floors get a dedicated hard floor brush. Natural bristles or felt strips.



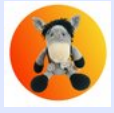
**Herman**

Miele's SBB Parquet is the canonical example. Felt strips so it glides without scratching.



**Corn**

So here's the tension I keep coming back to. The retailer says third-party attachments fit loosely, reduce suction, and can damage your wand. And the entire aftermarket is built on the premise that a seven-dollar adapter turns your mediocre machine into a competent one.



**Herman**

Both are true, and the resolution is boring. Fit matters, and cheap adapters vary enormously in how well they fit. But the ones that fit well work fine. The friction-fit systems don't have a magic seal, they have a taper and a slightly flexible plastic, and a third-party part made to the right dimensions behaves the same as the branded one.



**Corn**

The branded one is nicer to use.



**Herman**

The branded one is nicer to use and Dyson's forty-five degree geometry is better engineering than a straight tube. But the gap in performance is nowhere near the gap in price.



**Corn**

And that's the practical hook. A seven-dollar adapter versus a new vacuum.



**Herman**

The cheapest upgrade path in the house. The machine is fixed. The heads are modular. And most people never take the second step.



**Corn**

Which makes the expert vacuumer not someone who bought a better machine. Someone who bought the right heads.



**Herman**

Knows which one to reach for. That's the actual skill.



**Herman**

There's a reason the standard kit hasn't changed in decades, and I don't think it's conspiracy. It's that the floor is the job in most houses. Three tools covers the floor, the cushions, and the corner. Everything else is a minority use case, and minority use cases get cut in cost engineering.



**Herman**

One thousand two hundred and forty dollars.



**Corn**

Sorry?



**Hilbert**

That's the pipe and the two fittings. One inch galvanised. I put it on the end of the hose and ran it along the top of the kitchen cabinets. Six metres of it. You don't go up a ladder, you stand on the floor and you push it along like a plough.



**Corn**

You ran a six-metre pipe off a domestic vacuum.



**Hilbert**

Six weeks later I took it apart to see how much was in there. It was packed. Absolutely packed, right to the point where it joins the hose. The first three metres were solid.



**Herman**

That's the twenty-one percent loss, in physical form.



**Hilbert**

It's worse than the figure, because the loss isn't only suction. Every joint leaks. If you've got four joints and a hose and a pipe, by the time you get to the end you can feel it on your hand. There's air moving across the outside of the pipe.



**Corn**

You're losing pressure through the walls.



**Hilbert**

Not the walls. The joints. Each one weeps a little, and by the end the tool is working on what's left.



**Herman**

Which is the argument the retailer was actually making, and I dismissed it too fast. Not that third-party parts are bad, but that every connection is a leak surface, and you accumulate them.



**Hilbert**

The trick is tape. Not the branded joints. The dimensions are right, they're all made to the same taper, but the plastic is soft and it doesn't hold snug after a season. You run a turn of tape around the male end and push it on. Then it holds, and it doesn't whistle.



**Corn**

That's not in any of the guides.



**Hilbert**

It's in every workshop. The other thing nobody writes down is the diameter. One and a quarter is the one to buy. It's the size that everything fits, and it's small enough that the air is moving fast by the time it gets to the top of the pipe. A two and a half inch hose at the bottom of six metres of pipe will not lift a cobweb. It'll move a lot of air and it won't pull anything off a beam.



**Herman**

Velocity over volume, at the far end of a long run.



**Hilbert**

The machine doesn't know how far away it is. It just knows the air isn't arriving.



**Corn**

Did the pipe survive?



**Hilbert**

It's in the garage. I've got four of them. It's not a tool you use twice a year. It's a tool you use when you move into a house and you don't know what the last person left above the cupboards.



**Herman**

Once you've done that pass, you don't need it again for a decade.



**Hilbert**

That's what I'd say to Daniel about the cobwebs. His father-in-law's vac will do it. He's got the right head. The pipe is the part that makes it a job instead of a project.



**Corn**

The vacuum is a platform, not a product.



**Herman**

That's the shape of it. The machine is the fixed part. The heads are where every actual decision lives, and almost nobody makes them.



**Corn**

Which leaves a real question. If the aftermarket is this rich and this cheap, why do manufacturers still ship the same three tools?



**Herman**

Because the box is priced against the floor, and the floor is what sells the machine. The person buying a vacuum in a hurry, with a baby about to crawl, is buying a floor cleaner. They are not buying a platform.



**Corn**

The thirty percent figure then isn't consumer stupidity. It's a design choice. The kit is optimised for the purchase decision, not the ownership.



**Herman**

The most impactful upgrade in the whole appliance category is a seven-dollar piece of plastic and a roll of tape.



**Corn**

The cutting-room floor. One thing I couldn't fit anywhere. The EU capped vacuum input power twice, sixteen hundred watts in 2014, then nine hundred watts in 2017. And the industry's answer wasn't to argue, it was to get better at what happens at the nozzle. Dyson's angled crevice tool, better floor heads, more efficient airflow. The regulation did more for attachment design than any consumer campaign ever did.



**Herman**

That's a much better note to end on.



**Corn**

One forward-looking thought before we go. If the head is where the performance lives, the interesting product isn't a better vacuum. It's a better ecosystem. A single standard fitting, a good adapter, and a head for every job. Nobody's built it because the money's in the



**Corn (continued)**

machine. But the machine is the boring part.



**Herman**

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



**Corn**

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a question, or a cobweb story, leave us a review wherever you're listening. It helps.



**Herman**

We'll be back soon.