Stainless Steel vs. Plastic Utility Carts

By Lakeside Manufacturing

Utility carts have a pretty simple job: carry things from point A to point B.

But choosing the right cart isn’t always that simple.

From schools and hospitals to hotels, restaurants, senior living communities and workplaces, utility carts are used in very different ways. Some make a few trips a day. Others are constantly moving, carrying heavy loads, getting cleaned and taking the occasional hit into a doorway.

Both stainless steel and plastic utility carts can get the job done. The better choice depends on what you expect from your cart.

Executive Summary

Plastic and stainless steel utility carts each bring something different to the table.

Plastic utility carts are generally lightweight, quiet and more affordable upfront, making them a practical option for lighter-duty applications and operations.

Stainless steel utility carts are generally better suited for demanding daily use, frequent cleaning, repairability and applications requiring more specialized configurations.

When comparing the two, six factors can help narrow down the right choice:

Durability. Repairability. Cleanability. Customization. Long-term cost. Recyclability.

There isn't one material that's right for every operation. The goal is to choose the cart that best matches how—and how often—you'll actually use it.

1. Durability: Your Cart Is Going to Take a Few Hits

Probably a lot.

They get pushed through crowded hallways, around tight corners, into elevators and over thresholds. They may carry meals one day and heavy supplies the next.

Plastic utility carts are lightweight and easy to maneuver, making them well suited for lighter loads and everyday transport. Depending on their construction and use, however, plastic components can crack, warp or show wear over time.

Stainless steel utility carts are typically designed for heavier loads and more demanding use. Stainless steel offers high strength and impact resistance, which can make it a better fit for operations where carts are constantly moving or carrying heavier items.

Not every cart needs to be built like a tank. But when daily use gets demanding, construction matters.

2. Repairability: Something Broke. Now What?

Things wear out. Casters collect dirt and debris. Handles loosen. Parts eventually need replacing.

But that doesn't always mean you need a whole new cart.

Plastic utility carts often use molded components, and repair options depend heavily on the cart's construction and whether replacement components are available. In most cases, throwing out a broken cart is more practical than repairing it.

Stainless steel utility carts can often be repaired by replacing individual components such as casters, dollies, or handles. Stainless construction may also allow damaged areas to be repaired rather than requiring replacement of the entire cart.

If you're planning to keep a cart for years, it's worth asking before you buy:

Can I fix it, or will I have to replace it?

3. Cleanability: How Often Are You Cleaning It?

A cart in an office and a cart in a hospital may technically do the same job—but their cleaning routines probably look very different.

Plastic utility carts are generally easy to wipe down and work well in many everyday environments. Over time, scratches, gouges and surface wear can make some plastic surfaces more difficult to maintain, creating areas where bacteria, dirt and grime can collect.

Stainless steel utility carts have a smooth, nonabsorbent surface and tolerate frequent cleaning well. That's one reason stainless steel is widely used in foodservice, healthcare and other environments where routine cleaning and disinfection are critical.

For occasional cleaning, either material may work well.

For frequent or more demanding cleaning, material becomes a bigger part of the decision.

4. Customization: Does a Standard Cart Work for You?

Sometimes the cart you need already exists.

Sometimes you need something custom.

Plastic utility carts are commonly manufactured using molds, which makes them efficient for producing consistent, standardized designs. The tradeoff is that changing dimensions, shelf spacing or other structural features can be difficult.

Stainless steel utility carts are fabricated rather than molded, giving manufacturers greater flexibility to modify existing designs or build something completely custom. Dimensions, shelf layouts, handles, casters and other features can often be adjusted around your specific needs.

If a standard cart checks every box, plastic or stainless steel may work equally well.

If the cart needs to fit your workflow instead of the other way around, stainless steel generally offers more flexibility.

5. Long-Term Cost: Think Beyond the Price Tag

The lowest price isn't always the lowest cost—and the most expensive cart isn't automatically the best investment.

Plastic utility carts generally cost less upfront. For lighter-duty applications, occasional use or environments where sanitation is a secondary concern, that lower initial investment can make them a practical choice.

Stainless steel utility carts typically require a larger upfront investment. Their durability, repairability and longer potential service life can help offset that initial cost.

Instead of looking only at the price tag, consider the bigger picture:

How often will the cart be used? How long do you expect to keep it? How easy is it to clean? Can worn parts be replaced? What happens if it gets damaged?

6. Recyclability: Ready to Retire Your Cart?

Even a cart built to last won't be around forever. So, what happens to the material when it's finally time to retire it?

Plastic utility carts can be complicated to recycle. Different types of plastics have different recycling requirements, and carts may contain mixed materials, additives or components that need to be separated. Depending on the type of plastic and local recycling options, some carts may not be accepted for recycling at all.

Stainless steel is 100% recyclable and can be melted down and reprocessed repeatedly without losing its strength, corrosion resistance or structural properties. At the end of a cart's life, the stainless steel can be recovered and used to manufacture new stainless steel products rather than becoming waste.

So, Stainless Steel or Plastic?

The slightly annoying answer?

It depends.

Plastic utility carts can be a smart choice when you prioritize lighter weight, quieter operation and a lower initial investment.

Stainless steel utility carts can be a smart choice when durability, frequent cleaning and sanitizing, repairability, customization, long-term use and recyclability matter most.

Ultimately, choosing between the two comes down to something pretty simple:

Don't choose a cart based only on what it's made of. Choose it based on what you're asking it to do.