

Taking green beyond cleaning chemicals

From certification to sustainability, green is a journey not a goal

By Mike Kapalko

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At the core, green cleaning means using supplies and procedures that have reduced impact on people and the planet. From its early grassroots inception decades ago as a niche market, green cleaning has evolved into a green buildings movement that continues to expand.

Today, green is not a goal but an ongoing journey.

“The way we define the concept today is not the way we are going to define it tomorrow,” says Mark Bishop¹, Deputy Director of the Healthy Schools Campaign, the non-profit driving force behind the nationwide push for green cleaning in public schools. “We are going to look for improvements in packaging and distribution. We’re going to look to ensure that we have equipment and paper included as part of these programs. We’re going to continue to increase water and energy efficiency. It’s going to continue to broaden and encompass more.”

Proof that the expansion of the term’s scope is already well under way is evident in the growing number of states adopting green cleaning rules or guidelines for their schools. It also shows in the burgeoning number of green products on grocery store shelves and on the supply shelves of facilities, contract cleaners and their distributors. From its original focus on the development of non-toxic cleaning products, there has developed a market-driven expansion into greener supplies, equipment and processes.

Sanitary paper supplies made from recycled fiber, touchless faucets, waterless urinals and touch-free paper dispensers have become common and are often seen in office buildings, hospitals, factories and schools. The same is true of controlled usage dispensers.

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As these and other products compete with each other for environmental one-upmanship in a marketplace that increasingly values green, the benefits accrue to people, planet and company profits.

- Controlled usage dispensers mean reduced waste and buying fewer supplies.
- High-capacity, low-maintenance dispensers deliver labor savings.
- Recycled fiber in paper products diverts waste from the landfill stream.
- Carpets that are properly cleaned last longer by reducing wear from hidden dirt.
- Employees in healthy buildings are more productive and less likely to be sick.
- Safer cleaning chemicals and procedures along with good training reduce worker injuries, decrease Workers’ Compensation claims and lower insurance costs.

Public awareness of the environmental impact of products and lifestyle choices continues to grow. Americans are increasingly aware that they have a long way to go in terms of lightening their footprints. While constituting only five percent of the world’s population, the U.S. consumers have the largest environmental footprint on earth, consuming at least a quarter of its natural resources.²

Just as consumers are becoming more conscious of their carbon footprints, facility managers and contract cleaners are seeing multiple levels of benefits in the greening of the industries.

The Bigger Picture

Green Seal™ sets the standard as the premier third-party certification for cleaning products and is best known for its GS-37 standards. EcoLogo™ is North America's oldest and most respected multi-attribute environmental certification program.

While Green Seal focuses primarily on product content and life-cycle performance, EcoLogo evaluates not only product content but also the total manufacturing process including energy and water usage and waste water management. ISO 14001 also concentrates on the manufacturing process but does not evaluate product content.

On the positive side, green already has matured quite dramatically from its original focus on non-toxic cleaning products to include improving the environmental compatibility of a wide range of products, from paper towels to light bulbs to food. Green restaurants, for instance, with their locally grown, organic vegetables are on the rise.

Being green involves much more than guidelines for recycled content or ratings for energy usage

In the facility management and cleaning arenas, there is a growing recognition that being green involves a complex and holistic approach that encompasses much more than guidelines for recycled content or ratings for energy usage.

Judged solely on content, a jan/san paper product made from 100 percent recycled fiber instead of virgin or mixed fiber is an environmental plus. But if that product has been shipped by truck for thousands of miles to reach you or your distributor, the benefits

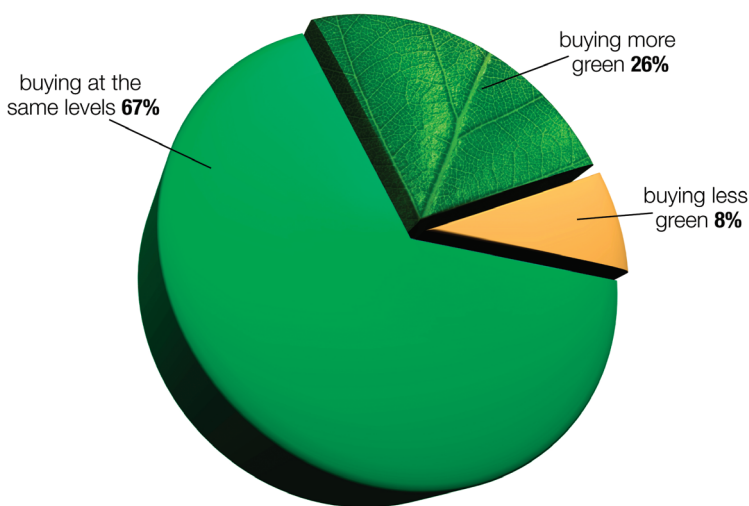
of recycling could be more than offset by fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Hence, regional mills and shortened supply chain metrics are important considerations in evaluating overall impact.

This bigger picture approach holds true if the product manufacturer is using energy and natural resources inefficiently or producing a product that is going to wear out more quickly and therefore need to be replaced more often than an alternative.

The good news is that manufacturers are both stimulating and responding to strong market demand for green products. And because the best of those products have shown themselves to be equal or superior to non-green alternatives when it comes to performance, the market support for green has proved itself resistant to adverse economic conditions.

In a national poll taken at the end of this March, when the economy was still in freefall, only 8 percent of the 73 percent of participants who identified themselves as green purchasers said they had reduced their green purchasing, and 26 percent reported they had increased their green purchasing.³

Of the 73% of people who are buying "green," how has the current economy affected their "green" purchases?



Harris Interactive Poll, March 27-March 31, 2009

The marketplace support for green has been strong enough to sustain the momentum of the movement through tough times. But the marketplace has also stimulated a proliferation of third-party certification labels and, in the worst cases, of the environmental sin known as greenwashing.



Swimming in Seals

Green Seal, EcoLogo, Energy Star, Green Label, ISO 14001, Green Guide, Environmentally Preferable Products, Build Green, Cleaner and Greener, Green Globe, Green Shield, SmartWood, WaterSense, Eco-Leaf...

There are an estimated 300-plus environmental labels in the world, including more than 80 used in North America alone. Telling a meaningful third-party certification from a marketing gimmick can sometimes be a daunting, time-consuming task and one that proves valuable only if the claims can be trusted.

Scot Case, Vice President of TerraChoice and Executive Director of its EcoLogo program, made this point in testimony to Congress this June.⁴

Greenwashing, the practice of exaggerating or fabricating environmental claims, is not only rampant but the Federal Trade Commission lacks the resources to properly police it, Case's testimony asserted. The solution, he testified, is the ability for consumers to compare product claims in a standardized, transparent process.

As the marketplace continues to drive and reflect the desire for meaningful, reliable green certification labels, the convergence toward a shared standard, fewer seals and the decreasing occurrence of greenwashing seem like attainable goals.

Green Buildings

In bringing green to the building level, one certification sets the bar when it comes to being meaningful and transparent.

Sin of Greenwashing:		Committed By:
1.	Hidden Trade-off	Suggesting a product is "green" based on an unreasonably narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues.
2.	No Proof	An environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification.
3.	Vagueness	Every claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer.
4.	Irrelevance	Making an environmental claim that may be truthful but is unimportant or unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products.
5.	Lesser of Two Evils	Claims that may be true within the product category but that risk distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole.
6.	Fibbing	Making environmental claims that are simply false.
7.	Worshiping False Labels	A product that, through either words or images, gives the impression of third-party endorsement where no such endorsement actually exists.

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The biggest enemy is not apathy but taking on too much too fast

The LEED rating system of the U.S. Green Building Council is the generally recognized voice for environmentally responsible design and operation of buildings. The holistic approach of LEED's criteria is designed to ensure that environmental impact includes both design and operation.

A small building renovation project that sought and recently received LEED certification status serves as a case in point on the holistic approach involved in moving green beyond cleaning chemicals, products and processes. The building had energy-efficient fixtures and equipment installed, an interior recycling system established for office waste and materials, and took other steps required to meet certification by LEED. The building also is located close to ample public transportation options for employees.

The final step in the transportation part of the puzzle was taken when the company installed a bike rack and constructed a shower and changing room, thereby encouraging employees to ride their bikes to work when the weather allowed.

The success of the U.S. Building Council in establishing LEED as the lead voice when it comes to green buildings has not gone unnoticed by the cleaning industry. The desire for a broad consensus on standards leading to a single voice has led ISSA to establish its Cleaning Industry Management Standard (CIMS) program.

Getting Started

In the desire to become a truly green and eventually a sustainable organization, the biggest enemy is not apathy but taking on too much too fast.

Steven Ashkin, a pioneer and leading force in the green cleaning movement, lays out steps an organization can take in moving toward a greener profile.⁵

- Start with benchmarking where you are as far as use of green products, systems and processes.
- Identify and agree upon the opportunities for improvement including supplier, equipment, cleaning processes, building operation systems and other areas with potential.
- Establish measurable goals and realistic timelines and financial costs for achieving each goal.

“Once they do that, we recommend what we call the three bucket approach,” Ashkin says. “If they do an assessment and there are 100 available opportunities, it can be overwhelming. We tell people to take those 100 opportunities and assign them to one of three buckets. One bucket is things that are easy to accomplish and can be done at no cost or low cost. At the other end of the extreme is a bucket of all the things that will be hard to do and expensive. Everything else goes in the bucket in the middle. This process evolves the benchmarking into a simple plan that includes financial considerations and provides a way to move forward.”

What Lies Ahead

As green continues to mature and spread as a concept, the marketplace's demand for clarity and accountability will tend to unite legitimate certification organizations and start to drive out the greenwashers. Green Seal and EcoLogo recognize each other's certifications while use of Green Seal and EcoLogo products can contribute toward points needed for LEED certification.

This model of cooperation among EcoLogo, Green Seal and LEED is likely to become more common, allowing for legitimate certifiers to specialize in their own areas while recognizing and accepting each other's expertise. There will be a consolidation among those green certifiers who are merely duplicating efforts but enough variety of options to keep the field competitive.

The government also will get more involved within the next few years. Because of the economy, pressure on the Federal Trade Commission to get more involved in standard setting has eased off for now, but as the economy recovers, the FTC will be back.

There will be a continued movement beyond green toward true sustainability

There also will be a continued market-driven movement beyond green toward true sustainability, a concept that includes an even broader understanding of the socio-economic impact of the products we use and the processes that make those products.

As companies, and consumers, come to realize that they can buy environmentally compatible products that are made in environmentally preferable processes from multiple sources, they will increasingly prefer to do business with companies that are engaged in the kind of corporate practices that respect not only the environment but also their workers and the communities they live in.

“When most people use the term sustainability, they’re often really talking about environmental impact because they don’t include the social implications of

those considerations,” says Ashkin.⁶

“In the cleaning industry, we’ve worked hard to define green as products and services that reduce the health and environmental impacts compared to similar products and services. In that sense, we’ve tried looking at a very limited part of the social aspects, but just in terms of occupant or worker health.

“Clearly, sustainability is much broader than that. We don’t want to expose our workers to harmful products, especially if alternatives are readily available, but that still doesn’t get into the basic issues such as are we paying them enough so that they can feed their families.”

A final thought on what lies ahead. While it may be self-evident to point out that the future belongs to the young, the statement takes on increased relevance when viewed from an environmental standpoint. Those entering the workforce today are very upfront about their desire to work for companies that are good environmental stewards.

The purchasing manager for a Canadian-based hotel chain says the subject has been coming up increasingly at job fairs. “We’ve noticed lately that young people ask us: What is it you do for the environment?” says Peter Upton.⁷ “Saying ‘Well, I don’t know’ just isn’t a good answer.”

Footnotes:

1) Mark Bishop, 365: *Talking Tork Everyday* e-newsletter, July 2009 issue, <http://www.torkusa.com/Pages/News/News.aspx?id=172202>

2) U.S. National Report on Populations and the Environment, 2006 <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2006/LifestyleChoicesAffectUSImpactontheEnvironment.aspx>

3) Poll conducted online March 27-March 31, 2009, by Harris Interactive among 2,014 U.S. adults, ages 18 and older. Question: “Have recent changes in the economy affected your purchase habits of green products or services? By green products or services, we mean things such as non-toxic or biodegradable cleaning products, and restaurants that serve locally sourced food.” Responses: fewer of my purchases are green, 6%; my green purchases are about the same, 49%; more of my purchases are green, 19%; N/A – I don’t purchase green products or services, 27%. <http://www.torkusa.com/Pages/News/NewsList.aspx?id=150891&currpage=2&total=4>

4) *It’s Too Easy Being Green: Defining Fair Green Marketing Practices*. Testimony of M. Scot Case, June 9, 2009, before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce June, 9, 2009. http://energycommerce.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1650:energy-and-commerce-subcommittee-hearing-on-its-too-easy-being-green-defining-fair-green-marketing-practices&catid=1-29:subcommittee-on-commerce-trade-and-consumer-protection&Itemid=70

5 & 6) Stephen Ashkin, 365: *Talking Tork Everyday* e-newsletter, May 2009 issue, <http://www.torkusa.com/Pages/News/News.aspx?id=160974>

7) Peter Upton, Purchasing Manager, Coast Hotels, 365: *Talking Tork Everyday* e-newsletter, May 2009 issue, <http://www.torkusa.com/Pages/SimplePage.aspx?id=160979>