

True Green

The Green Cleaning Journey

By: Stephen Ashkin, President of The Ashkin Group (As Published in *ISSA TODAY*, March/April 2006, pp 12-13)

Like many of you, I've worked in the cleaning industry my entire career. During those years, I've witnessed-or been held hostage to-budget cuts and reductions in cleaning activities. It's quite common today for cleaning specifications to be written by accounting and financial departments with only one objective in mind: reducing costs. As a result, we're seeing more and more reverse-auction job bidding focused on driving down prices and the emergence of "performance-based" contracting, where cleaners are often forced to provide a nominal-cost level of cleaning that involves little more than removing visible soils.

I don't want to sound like Chicken Little, but our industry is under attack from these trends. At the same time, however, there's another trend, green cleaning, that represents a transformational opportunity to get our industry back on course and also to contribute to the improved health and productivity of building occupants.

So this is not a gloom and doom article. Rather, it expresses the greatest of hopes that our industry is now experiencing a period of great potential advancement.*

The Importance of Green Cleaning

As Victor Hugo once said, "Nothing, not all the armies of the world, can stop an idea whose time has come." Clearly, green cleaning is such an idea. But how do we use it to the best advantage of our industry, workers, customers, the environment, and future generations?

As I see it, the first concern in green cleaning has to be the needs of the building occupants and the environment-not costs, efficiencies, appearances, etc. While those other issues are critical, they are, in the final analysis, a means to an end. Thanks to organizations like the U.S. green Building Council, International Facility Management Association, and the Building Owners and Managers Association, this debate is now taking place at the building-owner and facility-manager levels. Thus, the value of green cleaning also encompasses the transformational effect it has on cleaning as it engages the people with the pocket books who make the decisions. Thus, although it may sound contradictory to some of today's thinking, this change in priorities represents a great opportunity to

increase cleaning budgets, simultaneously improving results, enhancing worker and industry esteem while enhancing the health and increasing the profitability of our customers.

Envision the benefits to our customers and the nation when increased and superior cleaning results in improved occupant performance in our commercial buildings, improved health outcomes in our hospitals, reductions in asthma rates, improved attendance and performance on standardized tests in our schools. The list goes on.

Just imagine the positive impact on your business and our industry overall if building owners and managers correctly embraced green cleaning and, therefore, the total amount of cleaning increased by 25 percent!

What Is Green Cleaning?

The simplest definition of green cleaning is "cleaning to protect health while minimizing the negative effects on the environment." This brings together two important concepts. First, it recognizes the need to focus on the health of the occupants and the cleaning personnel of our buildings. Second, it acknowledges the huge environmental impacts associated with the cleaning industry.

As an industry, I believe we understand the important role that cleaning plays in protecting people's health. Hand washing, cleaning, and sanitizing frequently touched surfaces, eliminating harmful particles through vacuuming and dusting, and other activities can all lead to a cleaner, safer, healthier, more productive environment.

However, many of our products (including cleaning chemicals, plastic liners, and other plastic products) are made from petroleum-a very valuable, but limited and nonrenewable, natural resource. Once we extract this substance from the earth and turn it into a product used only once-and either flushed down a drain or sent to a landfill-it's gone forever, inaccessible to future generations. Furthermore, some of our traditional cleaning chemicals are high in volatile organic compounds-which can cause respiratory irritation and trigger asthmatic attacks-and contribute to smog formation and water contamination. Some cleaning equipment lacks durability and must be replaced after only a short period of time, unnecessarily consuming additional resources to produce new equipment. Plus, the energy used during cleaning-both to power equipment and the lights used for night cleaning-contributes to environmental burdens.

Different Shades of Green

Green is not static. There is no "bar" that once you cross it you're green. Rather, it's a process of continual improvement, and many in our industry are beginning to understand it as the journey it is rather than as a final destination.

Everyone can begin the journey by carrying out a variety of simple steps that are better for human health and the environment and often reduce costs.

The biggest misconception about green cleaning is that it is product-focused. Green cleaning is not simply the replacement of a traditional chemical-based cleaning product with a "certified" green alternative. While this may be a



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good first step, green cleaning is a strategy that rethinks how to create a healthy, high-performing building that minimizes negative impacts on the environment.

Green cleaning begins by assessing the needs of the building occupants and looks at all products, including chemicals, paper, vacuums and other equipment, mats, waste and recycling containers, microfiber, source-control and pollution prevention strategies, etc. For a green cleaning program to achieve success, it's imperative that all of these products and strategies be organized into an efficient system or process.

And just as we don't want to waste chemicals and paper, we don't want to waste labor, either. For a program to be truly sustainable, it will even go as far as to examine how our workers are being trained, treated, and compensated. Without access to high-quality and dependable workers, even the best products, and systems will ultimately fail.

More Than Hype

It's true that some may think of green cleaning as hype and are using "green-wash" simply to sell traditional products masquerading as green. The opportunities are real, however, for those companies sincerely committed to all the goals of green cleaning.

The technologies of our industry have changed significantly in recent years. Now we can offer our customers products that perform the desired task at a competitive price and also reduce potential negative impacts to human health and the environment.

Fortunately, many manufacturers in our industry are well prepared to supply better, safer, healthier, more sustainable products that consume fewer natural materials and use fewer chemicals and less energy and water among other things-during their manufacture, use, and disposal.

The Future Is Now

Success within the cleaning industry is hard to achieve and changing how our customers think about cleaning is a monumental challenge. We can shape a greener and more prosperous future if we can resist arguing amongst ourselves about the details and focus on the big picture - the "journey." This is what green cleaning is all about.

So please join us and take advantage of the opportunity green cleaning offers to transform our industry. Our customers, employees, stockholders, and future generations will all be glad we did.

**I especially want to thank ISSA and its leadership, including Executive Director John Garfinkel, Director of Legislative Affairs Bill Bolek, Director of Industry Outreach Dianna Bissururm, and Director of Sales Anthony Trombetta, for their willingness to take a chance and support green cleaning long before it was the popular thing to do.*

The Ashkin Group is one of the nation's leading consulting firms working to green the cleaning industry. A 25+ year veteran of the cleaning industry, Steve Ashkin is the author of Green Cleaning for Dummies and a tireless advocate for environmentally preferable cleaning products. Often referred to as the “father of green cleaning,” Ashkin has played a pivotal role in setting industry standards, promoting environmentally preferable products, and advocating for socially responsible practices. For more information or to subscribe to his e-newsletter, DestinationGreen, visit www.ashkingroup.com.