

The Basics of Clean

Shiny floors are important, but it's time to move beyond lip service about why we clean — for asset preservation, productivity and public health

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Why do we clean?

That's a simple question, without a simple answer. Ask that question of a small child, and he might say, "so things aren't dirty." A Fortune 500 CEO might answer, "so the headquarters are attractive to the stockholders." A building service contractor might make a crack about making money. The mother of an asthmatic child will answer quite differently, as will a cost-conscious facility manager.

Ask some forward-thinking cleaning experts why we clean, and you won't get a pat response.

Cleaning is done for myriad reasons, says Dr. Michael Berry, a researcher and teacher of environmental science and management at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. According to Berry, proper cleaning:

- Directly contributes to security, comfort and productivity
- Allows for the reuse of space and materials
- Maintains the value of property and reduces the rate of depreciation
- Creates a unique psychology that enhances quality of life
- Encourages topophilia (love of place)
- Elevates a sense of well-being, which is the essence of good health
- Sends caring messages and images
- Promotes human dignity
- Accents aesthetics
- Manages waste and hazards and contributes to environmental protection
- Ensures sanitation by reducing adverse exposure levels

"Historically, I think our industry has forgotten that the basic reason we clean isn't to have shiny floors — it's for public health, to create a healthy environment and to protect the building itself," adds Stephen Ashkin, president of The Ashkin Group, Bloomington, Ind.

But, some members of the cleaning industry are beginning to understand, and are moving beyond simply cleaning for appearance. However, a "cleaning for

health” or “green cleaning” program can’t just be a marketing slogan — it needs to be a philosophy, fully ingrained within a cleaning operation, in order for it to succeed. The philosophy must be evident not only in brochures but in training, customer communication and purchasing practices as well.

Working definitions

For meaningful environmental-management and cleaning guidance to be presented to consumers, the process of cleaning must be defined, and understood, especially in relation to reduction of exposure to unwanted things,” Berry explains. “This is important so that systems designed or claiming to clean can be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in achieving a sanitary state.”

First, “cleaning” itself must be defined.

“Cleaning of any kind is the process of putting unwanted mass/matter in its proper place,” says Berry. “With regard to health considerations, cleaning has but one definition and purpose — [it] is the process of locating, identifying, containing and removing and properly disposing of unwanted substances from a surface or environment. When cleaning occurs, exposure to unwanted substances is reduced.”

This, in turn, reduces the probability of an unwanted effect — risk — from occurring. When the risk is acceptable, we call the environmental condition “sanitary,” Berry says.

Also, “health” needs to be defined in order for BSCs to be able to quantify their goals.

“We need to know what health is all about,” says Berry. “Health is much more than the absence of disease. Most importantly, health is an elevated condition or sense of ‘well-being.’ This is what cleaning provides.”

Indoor and outdoor environmental protection often get wrapped up in the label of “green cleaning,” but they’re important to health as well and should be defined in broader terms, Ashkin says.

“‘Green cleaning’ is cleaning to protect health without harming the environment,” he says. “I remind people we’re a huge industry, with lots of environmental impact. We have an opportunity to reverse that impact through purchasing [environmentally preferable products].”

Road blocks to healthy cleaning

A few problems stand between the philosophy and its overall implementation. One of them, says Larry Shideler, CEO of ProTeam Inc. in Boise, Idaho, is customer indifference and ignorance.

“Most people are concerned with cost,” Shideler explains.

In addition, in a leased building, owners are more concerned with appearance, because they want an attractive facility to present to their tenants, Shideler says. On the other hand, in an owner-occupied building, health is more of a concern, because that owner has a direct financial stake in the health of his or her employees.

Cost aside, customers might be indifferent to healthy cleaning because they don’t see janitors at work very often, and they might not know just what chemicals and procedures workers use.

“I was a contractor for years, and I was concerned more about the workers than the building,” Shideler says. “They were working all the time with toxic chemicals.”

Since BSCs often work at night, the building managers don’t see or smell the chemicals in the air; by the time they come to work in the morning, everything has dissipated, Shideler says.

In response to seeing workers struggling with harsh chemicals and heavy vacuums, Shideler designed a line of backpack vacuums, and has trademarked “Cleaning For Health” for use in his company.

Cleaning for health and safety starts with the custodian, he says, but not all customers realize that.

Ashkin cites an example of customer ignorance — he once consulted on a “sick” building. It was a state building, facing lawsuits because people were getting ill.

“They brought me in as a cleaning expert,” Ashkin recalls. “We found that the building was just dirty. The manager was surprised — he thought he was getting more than he paid for from his contractor!”

The problem wasn’t the BSC — it was that the contract didn’t provide for enough work to actually keep the building clean.

But, in spite of these challenges, Berry believes many in the cleaning industry are on the right track.

“In the past 20 years, we have all seen some profound changes in the way cleaning business is conducted,” says Berry.

BSCs and other cleaners are very aware of the indoor environment, and have been presenting themselves as environmental-management experts.

“In recent years, the successful end of the industry has blossomed in the practice of sound environmental management,” Berry continues. “The industry has been instrumental in validating the principles and strategies of environmental management indoors. It has defined itself through standards and technologies that highlight basic environmental-management principles such as maximum extraction, minimum chemical and particle residue, effective ventilation and responsible waste disposal.”

When these principles are applied to cleaning programs, we can see and measure dramatic improvements in environmental quality, especially indoor air — and these are things that can be quantified to demonstrate value, Berry says.

“When we see a 50 percent improvement in the air quality in an otherwise sanitary, non-problem building, because it is cleaned based on environmental-management principles, we see value in what the industry has to offer,” he says.

Another point that makes healthy and environmentally friendly cleaning more common now than in years past is the rapidly changing array of products available.

“Technology in the cleaning industry has changed enormously,” Ashkin says. “Five or 10 years ago, I might have said that less-toxic products equal more elbow grease at a higher cost. But the technology has improved significantly. There are environmentally preferable products in most categories that are as effective [as traditional products], but reduce health risks.”

Also, machinery has improved to help protect both janitors and building occupants, Shideler says. Ergonomic vacuums, better filters and more concentrated sprayers all help reduce worker strain and exposure to contaminants.

Implementing a program

In order for a company to have a successful cleaning-for-health approach, it must do three things, says Berry.

“First and foremost, the business must recognize and convince itself that there is value and business opportunity to be found in products and services that enhance environmental quality,” he says. “Second, the business must understand completely how and what products and services do for the environment and the quality of life.”

Finally, the business must be able to practice what it preaches by speaking the language of environmental management convincingly, generating a demand for the cleaning service, and establishing solid business relationships based on quality performance, respect and confidence.

That final step is key, Ashkin agrees.

“If you decide to develop a cleaning-for-health program, realize it’s more than a marketing campaign,” Ashkin advises. “Learn the stuff, walk the talk. You can’t just make a brochure with flowers and children on it — it’s not enough. Think through the whole program, and don’t embarrass yourself — don’t let your competitor take potshots at you. Evaluate your paper goods, vacuums and chemicals.”

However, not all customers will be interested in buying into a health agenda, especially if that agenda isn’t part of the lowest bid, Ashkin warns.

“We first need to recognize that we’re in a competitive market,” says Ashkin.

If people aren’t interested, there’s little we can do, he adds.

“Be realistic,” Shideler says. “People need to get educated, but that’ll come slowly, and it won’t change overnight.”

Whether a BSC or customer wants to address the health issue now, sanitation and environmental-risk management will remain high on the list of human concerns, especially in sensitive environments like schools, hospitals, nursing and retirement homes, Berry says.

“Given the environmental concerns in the marketplace today, there is unlimited opportunity for individual businesses that perform well,” he says. “Many forward-thinking cleaning businesses recognize this, and are doing exactly what they should be doing.”

Contractors who know why we clean — for health, for environment and for safety as well as for aesthetics — stand to come out ahead as the public becomes more educated. Customers who understand the value of cleaning will seek out these savvy BSCs, ensuring that cleaning will get the respect it’s due, and a contract that allows a facility to be cleaned as it should.

Cleaning For Life And Death

General janitorial work can be effective in removing everyday germs and dirt from an indoor environment, but the stakes become much higher when a previously unknown infection, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), breaks out and nobody knows what to do.

“SARS got people’s attention,” says Scott Robinson, CIH, CSP, director of safety services for San Francisco-based ABM Janitorial. “No one knew what was going on. We still have 16th-century paranoia about what we don’t understand. It was a tough thing, getting authorities to say what they knew about basic transmission.”

Although the World Health Organization and others devoted tremendous resources to fighting SARS, many government agencies couldn’t answer questions about how the disease was transmitted, or what, if any, disinfectants would work against the virus.

ABM designed a multi-step response protocol, which outlines notification, containment, personal-protective equipment and clean-up procedures. They shared this protocol with their customers, so everyone would know what to expect, and so clients could feel secure, knowing their BSC was prepared.

“We made order out of chaos,” Robinson says. “This way, we don’t have to say, ‘someone is sick; now, what do we do?’”

Although the protocol was designed specifically in response to SARS,

Robinson says the standard can be used for any disease outbreak or contamination, with adaptation to the specific pathogen.