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A New Year and A New You... for Green Cleaning Professionals

By Stephen P. Ashkin

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Each winter, as one year comes to a close and a new one begins, I am asked my predictions for the year ahead, especially as it pertains to Green Cleaning. I am proud to say that for the most part, I have been "right on the money." Most of my Green Cleaning predictions have materialized. My timing may not have always been exact, but the final outcome did occur.

The prediction I am most proud of was about three years ago when the world's economy was bordering on complete economic collapse. At that time I suggested that even with the economic downturn, Green Cleaning and the adoption of Green and sustainable designs, building operations, and strategies would continue to grow. That does appear to have been the case and, at least so far, I do not think the economic downturn had much impact on the Green cleaning movement at all.

And there is a simple reason for this: Although it is true that building and operating a Green and sustainable building a decade or more ago tended to be more expensive than a comparable conventional building, the opposite is true today. First, the costs to design and build a Green facility are now on par with conventional property.

But the big surprise to many building owners and managers is that they are discovering real savings in Green and becoming more sustainable. Not only do things such as worker productivity and student performance go up, but astute business owners and managers use the fact that they are Green and sustainable as a marketing tool. We see this done most effectively by large hotel chains, universities courting research and office buildings seeking to attract and retain tenants.

So where is the Green Cleaning journey going to take us now? The following is what I see evolving and beyond:

• **Green Cleaning as the new norm.** At one time, one of my colleagues in the professional cleaning industry suggested that the 80/20 rule would apply to Green Cleaning...80 percent of facilities continue to use conventional cleaning products while 20 percent would use environmentally preferable products. A

the reverse is evolving. Most end users now look for Green Cleaning tools, chemicals, and equipment and only select a conventional product when a Green equivalent is not available or does not meet their needs.

• **It's the economy, stupid.** Earlier we referenced the economy and how it has had minimal impact on Green Cleaning. Unfortunately, that has not been true of the professional cleaning industry. Although it was considered recession proof, we know now that is not the case. However, while conditions will not reach crash levels and the world's financial foundation is still shaky, we are starting to see growth, new hires, and expansion in the professional cleaning and related industries. I am suggesting that slowly but steadily things are picking up.

• **Water wise.** We use more water in the professional cleaning industry than most of us realize and during severe regional droughts, rarely give water use much of a thought. That is also changing and very fast. Water conservation will move from a back-burner issue to one of much greater concern and



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very fast. Water conservation will move from a back burner issue to one of much greater concern and importance in 2012. In fact, and this leads me to my next and most important prediction, water conservation strategies will likely become a key criteria for a facility to earn LEED* certification, and cleaning professionals will be called on to do their part by selecting tools and equipment that use water wisely.

- **The big LEED shake-up.** Revisions to LEED are expected the first part of 2012 and many of the criteria, such as water conservation discussed earlier as well as an increased focus on Green Cleaning, will impact the professional cleaning industry directly. As with any change, there may be some initial confusion, but these changes may also prove to have a silver lining for the professional cleaning industry and Green Cleaning. This is because the cleaning industry's role in building operations has grown in recent years, all as a result of Green Cleaning. No longer are we cleaning just to keep things tidy; we now clean to protect human health and the environment. End customers will increasingly turn to professionals as leaders, guiding them through the new LEED requirements, and in so doing, help their facilities cleaner and healthier throughout the year.

*Stephen P. Ashkin is president of The Ashkin Group, a consulting firm specializing in greening the cleaning industry and CEO of Sustainability Tool LLC, an electronic dashboard that allows organizations to measure and report on their sustainability efforts. He is also coauthor of both *The Business of Green Cleaning* and *Green Cleaning for Dummies*. Ashkin has worked in the cleaning industry since 1980 and has held senior management positions in leading consumer and commercial product companies. He began his work on Green Cleaning in 1990 and today is thought of as the "father of Green cleaning". For more information, visit www.AshkinGroup.com*