

## FOCUS ON HOUSEKEEPING/MAINTENANCE

# Are your cleaners 'green' or mean?

By Robert Kravitz

In the professional cleaning industry, Stephen Ashkin is known as the "father of green cleaning." He and his consulting organization, The Ashkin Group, began advocating the use of environmentally preferable cleaning products nearly 20 years ago, when most in the industry believed green cleaning was, at best, a passing fancy.

Jump ahead to today and green cleaning and the use of environmentally preferable cleaning products, tools and equipment have become essentially the norm in the professional cleaning industry. Now Ashkin and others are suggesting that chemical manufacturers take a step further and fully disclose all the ingredients in both green and conventional chemical formulations. Currently this information is not required on the material safety data sheets that accompany all cleaning chemicals



- Identifying ingredients that while environmentally preferable, may pose a health concern, especially for children and older individuals
- Noting the ingredients that while effective and green, may not be suited for use in a school, medical center or long-term care facility

The disclosure concept is certainly not new. More than 700 years ago, English government officials, concerned that bakers were using a variety of undisclosed ingredients such as ground beans and peas to make bread, required that they list what was in the bread they made and sold. However, the regulation did not ban the use of alternative ingredients and, in fact, it helped lower the cost of the bread. "It simply let consumers know what was in the bread they were selecting for their families," explains Ashkin. "Knowing what [was] in the bread helped them choose accordingly." (See sidebar "The issue of full ingredient disclosure.")

### The issue of full ingredient disclosure

Some manufacturers are opposed to full disclosure because they believe the ingredients used in their products are their intellectual property. In many cases, years of research have gone into the development of a cleaning product. Disclosure of ingredients might allow competitors to copy the formula without investing all the time and money of the original developer. The Consumer Specialty Products Association is aware of this concern and is attempting to develop a "checks and balances" system that allows for full disclosure while still protecting the rightfully earned intellectual property protection for the manufacturer.

sold in the United States. Typically, only those ingredients that may be hazardous or cause injury, especially if handled or used improperly, are cataloged. Furthermore, it's been discovered that even if a chemical is green certified or meets current green standards, it may still contain ingredients that could trigger negative reactions or health concerns, especially for those with weakened immune systems such as the elderly.

"The goal is simply greater transparency," Ashkin says. "[Ingredient disclosure] would help consumers and end customers make more thoughtful decisions when it comes to chemical selection." For the most part, full disclosure encompasses the following:

- Identifying key ingredients in all cleaning chemicals\*

\*Some ingredients are used in the manufacturing process but are not in the finished product. These would not necessarily need to be listed.

### WHAT ABOUT STEAM?

While some in the professional cleaning industry are advocating full disclosure programs, others are thinking even bigger by asking whether surfaces can be cleaned without the use of *any* chemicals.

In many cases, depending on the type of cleaning task to be performed, the answer is yes. For instance, steam cleaning systems are proving to be effective at not only cleaning surfaces but in some cases sanitizing and deodorizing them as well. This can apply to cleaning of walls, tile and grout in shower areas, restroom fixtures, counters, foodservice areas, bed