

Going Green Becomes Central Focus for New England Distributor

BY ROBERT KRAVITZ

Although most distributors are now marketing Green cleaning products, that was definitely not the case 10 or 15 years ago. Back then, most environmentally “friendly” products had not been certified by an independent third party. Because of this, the customer was never really sure if the product was green and did indeed have a reduced impact on the environment; this uncertainty often made it hard to sell Green products.

Initially, Green products were promoted as being good for the environment. Later we saw the move more towards health and safety issues enhance the interest in Green. Additionally, many Green products at that time were considerably more expensive than comparable, conventional cleaning products, and their performance was often poor when compared to their counterparts. Because of these issues, most Green cleaning chemicals and related products found a home on distributors’ storage shelves for months on end.

“It’s true that [Green cleaning chemicals] were a tough sale more than a decade ago, about when we

first started selling them,” said Paul Bertalan, General Manager for SWISH USA. “But, I was convinced they were safer for users and our clients, and would benefit the entire Jan/San industry. With improvements and new technologies, I knew they would continue to grow in market share.”

Bertalan says that in the mid-1990s, many of his customers — especially school districts and government facilities — became more safety conscious. This was one of the initial driving forces for Green cleaning products, translating into greater interest and more sales. However, the big leap into Green has occurred in just the past couple of years, when some of his customers, such as the State of Vermont, school districts throughout the northeast and major government and business centers such as IBM (Vermont), and the Albany Plaza in Albany, New York, transferred from conventional to Green cleaning chemicals.

Critical Points:

- Green Cleaning
- Distributor as Educator
- Systems Approach

Company history

SWISH USA is part of Swish Maintenance Limited, which was started in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, more than 50 years ago. Originally called Swish Chemical Products, the company began as a small chemical manufacturing and distribution company. In 1956, Walter Ambler took the helm and built the business from one location to more than 15, with close to 300 employees throughout Canada and the United States.

“Back then, this was truly a family operation,” said Bertalan. “Walter would make calls on customers and potential customers



every morning, his one employee would deliver the products ordered in the family station wagon that afternoon, and his wife, Lottie, would type the invoices each night.”

Many North American Jan/San distributors operated their businesses like this, according to Bertalan, and some still do so today. However, Ambler wanted his company to grow far beyond just one location, and believed this could be done if he held true to what he called his “simple truths” of a successful business and Jan/San distributorship. These truths are:

- **Don't waste people's time.**

Ambler believed when meeting customers and potential customers, it was important to have a purpose and leave them feeling that something tangible and helpful had been accomplished by the meeting.

- **Be a problem solver.**

Ambler saw himself not just as a salesperson of cleaning supplies, but as someone who could find solutions to his clients' cleaning challenges, a concept that was ahead of its time 50 years ago.

- **Underpromise and overdeliver.** Doing more and providing more value-added services for a client solidified the customer/distributor relationship Ambler believed was essential for his success.

- **Follow the Golden Rule.**

Ambler learned early that in business, as in life, treating people as he and his family would like to be treated was the open door to success.

“The Swish locations throughout Canada and the United States still operate with these truths in mind,” said Bertalan. “They are time-tested and have served the company well.”

Cleaner and safer

Bertalan said in the 1990s, along with increased concerns about safety, he saw a big shift toward environmental concerns and how cleaning products might be negatively impacting the



SWISH USA, part of SWISH Maintenance Limited

703 Pine Street
 Burlington, VT 05401
 Phone: (802) 864-0585
 Fax: (802) 864-0365
 Web site: www.swishclean.com

Number of years in business: 51
 Employees: 300+
 Branch locations: Peterborough (Canada home office), Barrie, Kingston, London, Oakville, Ottawa, Timmins, Sudbury, Sault Ste Marie, Wawa, Thunder Bay, Whitby, ON, Canada; Dartmouth, NS, Canada; Winnipeg, MB, Canada; and Marcy, NY, USA

Walter Ambler - Owner
 Paul Bertalan - General Manager, Swish USA

indoor environment. “This was especially true in the United States, where we started hearing about indoor air quality [IAQ] and how poor IAQ could negatively affect employee health and worker productivity,” he said. “And the schools found that more and more of its students were having allergic reactions and even asthma attacks while at school. Everyone wanted to find out why this was happening, and one of the first things they looked at was the cleaning chemicals, how they were used and how facilities were cleaned.”

According to Bertalan, the Green cleaning chemicals were no longer just sitting on store shelves. Now more and more of his clients were willing to at least try the products. “It was perfect timing because by then certification organizations such as EcoLogo^M had been established that could certify a product was made from safer ingredients with less impact on the environment, removing

the guessing game many clients and distributors had to play before,” he said. “And once they tested the products, they found many were comparable to, if not better than, the ‘non-Green’ chemicals they had used before.”

Bertalan also found that many of his clients were not using cleaning chemicals properly, especially when use involved dilution; improper dilution could negatively affect the indoor environment. Some end users had a belief that if some is good,

more will be better, which is rarely the case. For this reason, he encouraged his clients, especially those using environmentally preferable cleaning products, to install auto-dilution systems, "to use just what you need and not any more," he said.

Taking a green systems approach

Encouraging his clients to install dilution systems was the first step in encouraging them to take a "systems" approach to Green cleaning. In fact, if Bertalan could add one more "truth" to those already established by Ambler and ingrained in the Swish culture, it would be to teach customers that Green cleaning is a system. By this, he means that all the cleaning products, tools, equipment, procedures and work-loading necessary to clean a facility must be integrated together for the common goal of effectively cleaning a facility and, at the same time, reducing cleaning's impact on the health of cleaning workers, building occupants and the environment.

"Many of our customers may want to only purchase Green-certified cleaning chemicals but then select vacuum cleaners that have virtually no filtering systems," he said. "Sure, the chemicals will do their part, but the vacuum cleaners will likely release dust and contaminants into the air, reducing or eliminating all the benefits of the chemicals."

For Bertalan, taking the systems approach evolved from encouraging his clients to install dilution systems and use

Certified Green Cleaning formulas. Now he works with them so that they understand vacuum cleaners with high-filtration systems also play a role in Green cleaning, as do low-moisture carpet extractors, floor machines with vacuum systems, and high-quality matting systems, green paper products, proper sizing and strength of liners, effective training and efficient work-loading.

The time is now

Although sales were few at the beginning, Bertalan and others in the Swish family are proud of the fact they were involved in selling Green cleaning products when demand was still small. It helped him and his company differentiate themselves from other Jan/San distributors, and led many new clients to the company because their previous distributor either did not carry environmentally preferable cleaning products or did not know how to use them.

"That turned out to work for us very well," he said. "But we are concentrating on today by helping more of our clients establish comprehensive Green cleaning programs that not only keep their facilities healthy but are cost effective and help keep their facilities looking better than ever before." **MS**

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