

Selling the Green Concept

by Mike Sawchuk

One of the most popular movies to come out in 1987 was *Tin Men*. The story is about two competing aluminum-siding salesmen in the early 1960s who literally run into each other when one drives his Cadillac into the other's Cadillac—the car of



successful salesmen of the era. There are many plot twists and turns in the movie, but one of the underlying themes is that a salesman is a salesman: if he or she can sell aluminum siding, then he or she most likely can sell cars, encyclopedias, or vacuum cleaners just as well.

Although there may be some truth to this—sales is sales after all—those distributors marketing Green cleaning tools, chemicals, and equipment are finding that selling Green cleaning products is certainly not the same as selling conventional ones. There is actually a very real reason for

this. Selling Green is not necessarily about selling products or a new product line as much as it is about selling a concept.

A concept can often be complex, abstract, complicated, and hard to understand, at least initially. It is up to the distributor to help the customer get a mental picture of what Green cleaning is all about, its benefits, and what it entails. While a distributor's product knowledge is vital, it is this skill at explaining Green cleaning's concept that is the key to getting the client on the Green bandwagon. In most cases, once the concept is clear and understood, the customer will prefer Green cleaning products over conventional products and turn away only if a product does not meet performance criteria or is not cost effective.

Difficulty conveying the Green concept is one of the reasons some distributors report having difficulties selling Green cleaning products. The success rate of distributors in getting clients to adopt Green cleaning varies widely. In the past few years, some distributors have grown their Green cleaning chemical sales by 200 percent or more, while many others

have grown their Green business by only a nominal amount of less than 50 percent.

Based on the increased amount of calls manufacturers are getting from end users, it's clear that a lot of distributors truly know very little about the Green concept and Green cleaning. Distributors need to take the time to understand the concept of Green cleaning thoroughly so that they can clearly convey the message to their customers, and just as clearly demonstrate that they are the local green cleaning expert.

For distributors, selling Green offers the potential of opening many new doors and opportunities, allowing distributors to evolve from salespeople selling janitorial products to “Green specialists” helping their clients maintain facilities that are healthy as well as clean.

Getting Our Wheels Straight

A friend of mine is an avid bicycle rider and has been for years. He knows firsthand that it's the back wheel, as a result of his pedaling, that powers the bike. This wheel has to be strong and sturdy in order for the bike to move forward.

When it comes to Green cleaning, we can view the back wheel as our knowledge center. With extensive understanding of Green cleaning, the distributor can use this knowledge to answer a variety of questions, meet all types of cleaning challenges, and smooth out the bumps along the road to Green cleaning.

The front wheel, on the other hand, determines the direction of the bike. When selling Green cleaning products, the front wheel represents selling methods. Directing sales can be more challenging because distributors must listen to their client's needs and then apply—steer—their knowledge about environmentally preferable cleaning products toward meeting those needs. This process is more involved than that of selling conventional cleaning products. We are no longer just marketing products based on how well they perform or how cost effective they are. Instead, the safety and health-related benefits of the products are now center stage.

While selling the Green concept is more time-consuming than selling conventional cleaning products, it can be much

more rewarding. In fact, some distributors now believe that Green cleaning is not only helping to preserve the role of the distributor in our industry but, as the Green movement continues to expand, helping it to grow and become more valuable as well.

Taking the First Steps: The Audit

The first step in selling Green is to determine the current cleaning procedures in your customer's facility. This usually entails conducting an audit to see what products, procedures, and cleaning frequencies are currently being used. These products include everything used in the cleaning process, from paper products and cleaning cloths to floor machines and extractors.

Once this benchmark has been established, the next thing is to determine which products can be switched to Green easily and most expeditiously and how to introduce them. Most facilities switch to these new Green products by finishing up with the cleaning products now on hand and then adopting a policy that they will begin selecting only certified Green cleaning products going forward.

When helping the customer select a Green cleaning product, the distributor must be aware that just because a product is environmentally preferable and has been certified does not necessarily mean it performs as well as or better than a conventional product or other Green products for that particular customer's soil types, loads, substrates, water conditions, tools, equipment used, frequencies, etc.

Other Steps in the Green Selling Process

As the products are selected and incorporated into a facility's cleaning process, there are other steps involved in selling Green to a client. One of the most important is training the cleaning staff in the use of the products.

When selling any cleaning product, it is not unusual for the distributor to work with the cleaning professionals to demonstrate how to most effectively use the product. However, with Green products there is an added dimension. We must also tell them *why* environmentally preferable products are being selected. Very often there is resistance to using Green cleaning products. Typically, the decision to go Green has been made at a higher level and cleaning workers are simply instructed as to which products will be

used in the future. A more effective method for introducing environmentally preferable products, which the distributor can help develop for the client, is to involve everyone, including the cleaning workers, in the education and selection of the Green cleaning products.

Further, refocusing the cleaning workers on cleaning for the health of those using the facility and for the environment first over the appearance of the facility is part of this selling process as well. Of course, the products must perform, but emphasizing the health benefits of Green products has done wonders in improving what cleaning professionals think of themselves and their work.

Additionally, when using Green products, some cleaning frequencies may need to be changed. For instance, one of the goals of Green floor care is to reduce refinishing cycles as much as possible. The fewer times the floor must be refinished, the less impact cleaning has on the environment.

Jansan distributors of the 21st century are not the “Tin Men” (or women) that salespeople were decades ago. Our role in the health of our clients, their staff, and those that visit their

facilities has never been greater. There is a huge opportunity for those distributors that apply themselves and genuinely become Green experts.

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