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From Buzz to Breakthrough

By **Mike Sawchuk** — posted 08/15/2011



Not too long ago, one Canton, MA, company took a radical step toward reducing its overall carbon footprint by moving into a new, wind-powered office. This facility draws its energy from windmill and solar power stations in several areas throughout the country; that energy is then delivered via the national power grid.

The company also took some other steps to decrease its carbon footprint:

- Developing a more effective recycling program
- Selecting only recycled paper products for office use
- Installing controlled-use tissue and towel dispensers
- Installing water-reducing restroom fixtures.

The company's goal was to find ways to operate in a more environmentally responsible manner. By doing so, it hoped to become more efficient and cost effective, to be responsible to its community, and even to gain a competitive edge.

It might sound like we're talking about Google, Apple, Hewlett-Packard, or even Wal-Mart, all of which are taking significant steps to become not only greener but also more sustainable. But this company is actually a relatively small distributor for the professional cleaning industry. Its new office is an indication of how fast the industry is evolving from simply developing, marketing, and selling green cleaning products to becoming more sustainable in its own business operations as well.

In essence, this distributorship has gone on a "low-carbon diet," and the initiatives it has undertaken can be replicated, often quite easily, in schools and medical facilities throughout the country.

The Low-Carbon Facility

How can schools and medical facilities go on a low-carbon diet? Greening a company is an ongoing process, but once it begins, it starts to build on itself. Managers will find more and more ways to reduce their carbon footprint and become more sustainable. The focus must be on the journey, not on a destination.

One way managers can begin reducing their carbon footprint is by targeting foodservice areas and housekeeping departments to reduce carbon footprints. There are actually a number of steps that can be taken specifically in these two areas. Many are cost neutral and can have profound results, making a facility much more sustainable and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

For instance, in foodservice areas:

- Purchasing food locally and avoiding items that must be flown or trucked over great distances
- Avoiding food items that are excessively processed
- Asking vendors to use cartons and plastics made from recycled content
- Serving more vegetables; a 2006 United Nations study found that livestock production is responsible for about 18 percent of the world's greenhouse gases

Because foodservice areas and schools and universities in general are big energy users, managers should look in to alternative energy sources similar to those utilized by the distributorship mentioned earlier. Making this change is a simple process. It is true that some alternative energy sources can be more expensive than conventional ones. However, these additional costs are expected to even out in coming years.

Low-Carbon Housekeeping

The use of green cleaning products has helped facility managers become more sustainable, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and lower their overall carbon footprints. That's because these products are made with little or no petroleum or alcohol ingredients. In recent years, manufacturers of professional cleaning products have taken this a step further, making more and more products out of recycled materials and natural and renewable resources.

Green—or, better yet, certified green—cleaning products can be organized into three subsets: Environmentally preferable equivalents of traditional products, biorenewable, or bioenzymatic-based. Biorenewable and bioenzymatic products, which are actually subsets of the biobased cleaning product category, have been getting a big push recently from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's BioPreferred program. The goal of this program is to increase the purchase and use of renewable, environmentally responsible, biobased products by federal facilities.

Biorenewable cleaning products are made in whole or in significant part from renewable, domestic agricultural materials such as corn, soy, and citrus fruits. Bioenzymatic cleaning chemicals contain highly specialized nonpathogenic bacteria and enzymes that actually digest soils and organic waste, converting these into oxygen, carbon dioxide, and water. This not only leaves surfaces and subsurfaces cleaner, it also eliminates odors and leaves surfaces less slippery as well. Bioenzymatic cleaning chemicals continue to digest soils for up to 80 hours after application.

Although biobased/biorenewable/bioenzymatic cleaning products have been available for a number of years, some facility administrators have been reluctant to use them due to concerns regarding their performance and effectiveness. However, these products have improved significantly in recent years, garnering considerably more interest among both educational and medical facilities. Further, some have been proven green, earning certification from such organizations as the Environmental Choice Program™ (CCD-110, 113, 115, 116, 165) and Green Seal, which is developing a certification program specifically for bio-enzymatic based products.

Another example of janitorial and janitorial-related products that are reducing cleaning's carbon footprint is a new generation of matting systems, plastic liners, and even floor polishing and scrubbing pads used extensively in schools and hospitals. Traditionally made of petroleum-based ingredients—which contribute heavily to carbon emissions—many of these products are now being produced using ingredients similar to those in the biobased cleaning products discussed earlier. They are also being manufactured from recycled materials. In fact, even such unusual materials as soda and water bottles have become the primary materials used to manufacture sustainable plastic liners, mats, and floor machine pads.

Why the Title?

Green cleaning, sustainability, greenhouse gases, and carbon emissions have all been buzzwords for environmental groups, politicians, economists, scientists, and others. More often than not they are used as marketing terms, which in some cases has minimized the important issues they reference.

However, today these issues are finally becoming more than just talking points. Scores of industries—including education, health care, and professional cleaning—are taking meaningful steps to develop products and processes that are significantly more environmentally responsible and sustainable. In essence, we are finally putting the “buzz” into action, creating long-term benefits for us all.



Related Video

Tune into this video where Steve Ashkin discusses the future of green cleaning. [Watch it now.](#)



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