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Special Report: Green Product Certification

Like many hotels in North America, the Pacific Palisades Hotel in Vancouver, British Columbia, has been incorporating a variety of “green” and environmentally preferable measures over the past few years. However, just recently these measures have been accelerated as a result of customer demand.

“Our corporate clients now want their guests and staff to stay in healthier, ‘green’ hotels,” says Cheryl Bradely, manager. “This is a rather new development that we were not seeing just a couple of years ago.”

Accordingly, the hotel has been incorporating green cleaning chemicals, products, equipment, and systems to maintain the property, and has converted lighting to low-wattage, long-lasting fluorescents. Additionally, it uses certified-green building construction products for all renovations and additions to the hotel, and it now selects environmentally preferable carpeting, upholstery, fabrics and other decorative items whenever possible.

Fortunately for Bradely and countless other property and facility managers, the transfer to environmentally preferable products is much easier today than it was just a few years ago. This is because independent, third-party certification programs such as the EcoLogoM Program and Green Seal® have been established. These programs, which are widely accepted by all types of industries, have done the homework for the buyer and make the process of selecting environmentally preferable materials much easier.

However, this is a relatively new turn of events. For decades, there were no universally agreed-upon parameters for green products. What may have been termed green by one manufacturer might not have been acceptable by another manufacturer’s standards. This led to a considerable amount of confusion—not only for manufacturers and distributors but for end-users as well.

A Look Back at the Green Movement

In the early 1970s, as a result of the ecology movement spreading throughout the United States, many manufacturers started revising their products and using what were often believed to be safer ingredients and materials. It was at this time that new terminology entered the vernacular, such as “environmentally safe,” “environmentally friendly,” “recyclable,” and “earth friendly.”

These expressions were not always clear to the end-user, and, as mentioned earlier, what one manufacturer claimed to be environmentally safe was not necessarily in accordance with the guidelines used by another. Worse yet, some products that were deemed green or environmentally preferable, or claimed to have reduced negative impact on the environment were later determined to be fraudulent.

“Essentially, what we saw at that time was a free-for-all, because any manufacturer, intentionally misleading or not, could simply self-declare their products green,” says Scott McDougall, president of the EcoLogo Program. “Not only did this lead to confusion, but it probably hampered the acceptance of green products for most of the 1970s and 1980s.”

The Need For Certification

In the past 15 years, although considerable disagreement among green advocates and government entities has surfaced, definitions of what is green have become clearer and more accepted. The term “environmentally preferable” evolved, which referenced products that were safer to human health and the environment. It also referred to products that were made from sustainable, recycled or renewable sources; could be recycled; and were biodegradable.

“This clarification also eliminated much of the confusion and stumbling blocks for developing environmentally preferable products,” explains McDougall. “Manufacturers had a good understanding of what it takes to produce and market a green product, and end customers had a better idea of what is green … and what is not.”

Although progress had been made, many advocates still had their own, sometimes conflicting, definitions of an environmentally preferable product. But the creation and overwhelming acceptance of third-party certifying organizations such as EcoLogo ended the turmoil. The result: “It is now clearer and much easier for building designers, facility managers, manufacturers and customers to rest assured that a product labeled environmentally preferable is indeed so,” adds McDougall.

The Certification Procedure

For a product to be certified green, it must go through extensive testing procedures, according to McDougall. The manufacturer must inform the certifying organization why the product should be certified and in which category the product belongs.

Once the product is accepted for evaluation, the certifying organization does not necessarily perform the actual testing. Instead, manufacturers are referred to recognized, accredited laboratories to verify the product’s ingredients and ensure that it meets specific International Standards Organization (ISO) and quality-control standards, as well as the green standards honored by most certifying organizations and other criteria for a particular product type.

The manufacturer submits these reports along with any pertinent materials for review. If the product passes initial tests and analyses, EcoLogo or the certifying organization involved, conducts a site audit to confirm the information provided by the laboratory and the manufacturer.

“We try to trace a product back to the very day it was manufactured,” says McDougall. “That way, we can verify the ingredients in the product.”

Even if the product passes the site evaluation, the manufacturer’s president or CEO must also sign a “Declaration of Compliance” agreeing that the certified product(s) will continue to meet EcoLogo’s guidelines. In addition, notes McDougall, the certification organization reserves the right to conduct surveillance audits, often at random, to ensure compliance.

What the Certification Means

Most of the certification organizations have their own mark of approval, such as the EcoLogo seal. Manufacturers can use this seal

on package labeling and in marketing materials once products have passed the certification program and earned the right to be called environmentally preferable.

Certification means that the product:

- Has a reduced impact on the environment when compared to products used in the same or a similar capacity
- Does not include (or has considerably fewer) harmful ingredients, such as volatile organic compounds (VOCs), carcinogens, and endocrine disruptors
- Does not contain hazardous by-products
- Is packaged in recyclable materials

Consideration is also given to the cost of the product. A green product that is considerably more expensive than a conventional, non-green product may be a hard sell. The goal is for the environmentally preferable product to be cost competitive or at least cost neutral when compared to similar non-green products. Once implemented or installed, a product may be deemed cost neutral if employers notice improved worker productivity or reduced absenteeism—both of which produce cost savings.

The Impact of Certification

Certification organizations have assisted interior designers, architects, planners, facility managers, and manufacturers in building, designing and producing environmentally responsible products and facilities. “The parameters have been established,” says McDougall. “Without these guidelines, a manufacturer would be hesitant to take the time and spend the money to develop a green product because of the uncertainty.”

McDougall also believes certification has helped professionalize many industries. “When environmentally preferable products are selected, the people using and working with [them] often realize their job has greater value and impact on building occupants,” he concludes. “They realize their job is not just to build, assemble, or install but to add features to a facility that help keep people healthy and protect our environment. This elevates the worker’s role considerably.” •

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