



Product Ingredients: It's Time to Find Out What's Really Inside

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The advent and acceptance of Green-certification programs was a major stepping stone in the evolution of Green Cleaning. For the first time, when it came to selecting environmentally preferable cleaning products, all of the guess work, homework, and much of the confusion of end-users, facility managers, and other building professionals was eliminated. If the product was Green certified by a recognized and independent third-party certification organization, such as GreenSeal® or EcoLogo™, users were confident the product was safer to use with a reduced impact on the environment.

However, now end-users want more. They want, as do we at The Ashkin Group, manufacturers of cleaning chemicals to provide complete disclosure of ingredients on the labels and marketing materials for their products. Further, it should be provided in some standardized format so that it is consistent to make it easier for the end-user to easily ascertain exactly what ingredients are used so they can do further research on health and environmental impacts should they choose to do so.

I brought this issue to the industry's attention at last year's ISSA/INTERCLEAN® North America tradeshow in Orlando, Florida. I mentioned that while five consumer-focused chemical manufacturers have adopted ingredient disclosure programs, no commercial chemical manufacturers have followed suit.

However, I have recently been told that some manufacturers of professional cleaning chemicals are now providing ingredient disclosure information. But upon closer examination, it appears these manufacturers have frequently developed their own format. This means the ingredient information provided is not in a similar, standardized, or consistent format, which tends to cause more confusion than clarification.

A reasonable, workable, and voluntary ingredient communications format has been developed by the Consumer Specialty Products Association (CSPA), the Canadian Consumer Specialty Products Association (CCSPA), and the Soap and Detergent Association (SDA) in negotiations with the Sierra Club, one of America's largest environmental organizations. The following is the template they suggest should be placed on all professional cleaning chemicals:

- The name of the product;
- A picture of the product;
- A listing of the intentionally added ingredients* used that are above 1 percent of total ingredients in order of predominance; these should be followed by a listing of ingredients used under or at 1 percent of total ingredients; and
- The benefits of this product.

The agreed upon format also suggests where this ingredient disclosure template should be located. Among their suggestions are on the product's label, the manufacturer's Web site, or provided by dialing a toll-free telephone number. It should also be noted that if adopted, other cleaning chemical manufacturers around the world will likely start honoring this format.

Confidentiality Issues

One of the reasons many chemical manufacturers are hesitant to list the ingredients or composition of ingredients in their products is that it could be used by their competitors to develop and market similar products. This means all the time, energy, and resources employed to develop the product could be in vain.

However, this suggested disclosure information program protects what is considered “confidential business information”. It provides that in such cases, “ingredients may be listed by their chemical function and/or chemical class descriptors.”

In other words, manufacturers are not required to disclose information that they claim are trade secrets, proprietary, or need to be kept confidential. Further, to help manufacturers determine if the names of certain ingredients should be kept confidential, they reference confidentiality procedures used for chemical ingredients by North American cosmetic manufacturers. Some of the factors that would be considered to help determine if an ingredient can remain confidential include:

- The extent to which the ingredient is known to employees of a company or to employees of other companies making similar types of products;
- The extent of measures taken to keep the ingredient secret and confidential;
- The amount of money and effort used to develop the ingredient; and
- The ease or difficulty with which the identity of the ingredient could be acquired or developed by others.

Why Ingredient Disclosure is so Important

Earlier we mentioned how valuable Green certification has been to the progress of Green cleaning. Before certification, many companies would self-certify their products Green. We would then find out many of these products did not have increased environmental or health protections. Sometimes the self-certification was done with the best of intentions, and sometimes it was done purely for marketing benefits, today known as “greenwashing.”

However, the end result was the same: It confused the end-user, who more often than not, decided not to select Green products until they could be sure they were truly Green.

Although we have now crossed this bridge, greenwashing is still an issue in North America and Australia. The adoption of a standardized system for ingredient communications by all professional cleaning chemical manufacturers will help put one more nail in the greenwashing coffin, and help further the adoption of safer, effective, and reduced impact cleaning chemicals throughout the industry.

*Many products will have ingredients referred to as “incidental ingredients.” These are ingredients that typically have no technical or functional effect on the product and, under this suggested program, are not required to be listed.