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By **Robert Kravitz**

After investing the time, energy and money to build a green facility, some condo managers have made few changes as to how the buildings are cleaned. They use bleach, conventional window cleaners and floorcare products, low-filtration vacuum cleaners and traditional floor machines. This happens for a variety of reasons and it extends far beyond condominiums. At the root of the problem is the fact that many managers are still not sure what green cleaning is all about and how to incorporate it into their facilities.

The missing link

The best advice I can offer the manager of a green condominium or any facility that calls itself green is to view green like the spokes in a wheel," says Mike Sawchuk, vice president and general manager of Enviro-Solutions, a Canada-based manufacturer of Green cleaning chemicals. If a spoke or two is missing, the whole wheel may collapse."

Taking this a step further, incorporating a number of environmentally preferable elements into a facility and then cleaning it with conventional cleaning products can defeat the entire green goal. According to Sawchuk, the Harvard School of Public Health reported that the health benefits of environmentally preferable flooring materials can be eliminated the first time they are cared for with conventional polishes and cleaners.

The amount of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) emitted from a single waxing of the floor [using conventional cleaning products] is comparable to the amount of VOCs emitted from the flooring over its entire lifetime," says Sawchuk. This means all the benefits from the floor have been essentially eliminated."

What makes it green?

When facility managers first decide to switch to environmentally responsible products, invariably one of the first questions that arises is "how do I know it's really green?" Although addressing this issue may have been a problem several years ago, today identifying environmentally preferable cleaning products is relatively easy.

There are a number of Green certifying organizations such as EcoLogo™ and GreenSeal®," says Sawchuk. They evaluate the products based on a variety of standards from the ingredients used to manufacture the product, to how it is packaged, to how it is delivered and eventually disposed of. Once a manufacturer meets these criteria, they may place the green label of the certifying body on their products and marketing materials."

Sawchuk adds that products are not green forever. Usually the certification is for a set period of time, 18 months to two or more years. If the standards change, as they can, the manufacturer must meet the new criteria in order to retain green certification.

He also advises facility managers to work with their distributors in selecting green-certified cleaning chemicals and to test the products at their facilities under real life conditions.

Just because a cleaning chemical is green certified does not mean they all work the same," says Sawchuk. Their performance, costs, ease of application and other variables can all vary just like any product."

Beyond the chemical link

Condo managers must also be aware that green cleaning involves more than just chemicals, according to Christopher Tricozzi, vice president of sales and marketing for Crown Mats and Matting, the oldest and one of the largest matting manufacturers in North America. For instance, if I walk into a new condominium complex and just see a 3-by-5 mat at the front door, that tells me a link in the green chain is missing," he says. Matting is an integral part of green cleaning."

According to Tricozzi, an effective, high-performance (long-lasting) matting system should be 15 feet long, composed of a wiper mat to remove large debris from shoe bottoms, a wiper/scrapper mat inside the facility to remove remaining debris and a wiper mat placed in the lobby as the final line of defense. In place, the system is designed to trap and hold as much as 85 per cent of all soil, moisture and contaminants on shoe bottoms, preventing them from being walked into a facility.

Further, as far as specific toxins that can harm human health, recent studies by the Washington Toxics Coalition, reports that just by using any entryway matting system, the amount of pesticide residue on carpets can be reduced by more than 25 and dust by more than 33 per cent.

How is this green? The less soil walked into a facility, the fewer cleaning chemicals and products necessary, and when this is achieved, cleaning s impact on the environment is reduced, one of the goals of green cleaning," says Tricozzi.

Beyond matting, vacuum cleaners and carpet extractors are also available that meet certain environmental and performance standards. The Carpet and Rug Institute has developed a Green Label program for vacuum cleaners and a similar Seal of Approval program for carpet extractors.

Although the criteria are different for the two types of equipment, the goals are the same," says Tricozzi. The equipment must be engineered to protect indoor air quality, meet certain performance standards and protect carpet fibers."

At this time, there is not a green certifying body or criteria for floor care equipment, however, many manufacturers are already greening their machines. For instance, vacuum systems have been installed on many machines that help capture the dust generated in floor maintenance. Additionally, some machines such as cylindrical floor machines and other machines use considerably less water and chemicals than conventional equipment. Again, the less chemicals used, the less impact on the environment," adds Tricozzi.

Keeping it green

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for a new cleaning system to be implemented, only to find managers and custodial workers drifting back to old habits, chemicals and products. Ways to avoid this include establishing some sort of green committee made up of major condo stakeholders: tenants, management, cleaning professionals. Their duties are to stay on top of how the facility is being cleaned, look for areas of improvement and make sure the green cleaning program is maintained.

Additionally, both Sawchuk and Tricozzi say that ongoing custodial training is a must. This helps prevent the drift back to old methods, which may not be as healthy as the procedures used for green cleaning. Further, new cleaning techniques and systems are continually being developed that help make cleaning workers more productive, efficient and greener all at the same time.

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