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Why Ingredient Disclosure is Important in Green Cleaning

7/25/2011 By Stephen Ashkin

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Many of us would assume that if a cleaning chemical has already been labeled green by a leading certification organization it must be pretty safe, assuming it is used correctly as instructed. This is true, at least in comparison to many conventional cleaning products used for the same or similar purposes.

However, these days I think we need to take this a step further. We need to know more specifically what is in the cleaning chemicals we are using, green or not. This "ingredient disclosure" appears to be one of the next big developments in the professional cleaning industry.

There are many reasons for ingredient disclosure beyond the commonsense idea that end customers should be able to know what exactly is in the cleaning chemicals they are using. These are some of the key reasons:

- To identify chemicals and ingredients that might meet a specific need, such as protecting the health of small children in day-care-type settings;
- To identify ingredients that while environmentally preferable may still pose a health concern for some individuals; and
- To note products and/or ingredients that while effective and green may not be best suited for a particular site such as a medical facility or a hotel property.

Some in the industry claim we can already access most of this information by referencing the material safety data sheets (MSDS) available on all professional cleaning products. However, the purpose of the MSDS is not necessarily to report all ingredients in the product but to list only those that might potentially be hazardous or present in the product above a specific amount.

This means that ingredients that fall below these thresholds or might be harmful to only some people or only in certain situations would not be reported. Additionally, the focus of most cleaning chemical MSDSs is the protection of the user—the housekeeper in a hotel. Full disclosure would take this to the next step, ensuring the protection of the health of both housekeepers and guests.

Grumbling Manufacturers

This is all fairly straightforward. It seems there would be no objection to listing the ingredients in a cleaning chemical. In fact, most manufacturers already list many of the key ingredients in their products on the labels.

The key issue at stake—and understandably so—is confidentiality. Chemical manufacturers are concerned that if their competitors knew exactly what is in their products—many of which could have taken years and considerable sums to develop—they would quickly introduce similar products. Worse yet, competitors might not have to invest the time and money that went into originally developing the product, which might mean they could sell it at a reduced cost to end customers.

Copycat incidents have happened, of course. There have even been situations when one manufacturer tried to mimic the smell of a competitor's cleaning product, realizing the fragrance actually helped market the brand. However, programs are now in place that meet the requirements of ingredient disclosure while also protecting the manufacturer's product confidentiality.

For the most part, these programs require manufacturers to list a product's ingredients by their "chemical function and/or chemical class description," as outlined by the Canadian Consumer Specialty Products Association (CCSPA) and the Soap and Detergent Association (SDA). These programs offer a degree of confidentiality while still providing consumers with enough information to know if there are ingredients they wish to avoid or those they wish to have in the cleaning chemical.

What the Future Holds

Although no one can predict exactly how many manufacturers will develop ingredient disclosure programs, my experience in the industry indicates such programs probably will evolve over time. As long as the manufacturers' "trade secrets" are protected, there are few reasons for this to not move forward. And in an age when everyone is asking for greater transparency, it is likely customer demand will help motivate the industry to adopt some types of ingredient disclosure programs.

Stephen P. Ashkin is president of [The Ashkin Group](#), a consulting firm specializing in greening the cleaning industry and CEO of [Sustainability Tool LLC](#), an electronic dashboard that allows jansan companies to measure and report on their sustainability efforts. He is also coauthor of both *The Business of Green Cleaning* and *Green Cleaning for Dummies*.



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