

MAINTENANCE Supplies

Becoming the Green expert

BY RYAN OLSON

When it comes to Green products, usage is on the rise, end users are demanding more options and manufacturers are being challenged to meet these needs. What can you expect for 2008 and how can you prepare yourself to become the Green expert in your regional marketplace?

A majority of U.S. workers (64 percent) say that their decision to work for a company or purchase its products are “strongly” or “somewhat” influenced by a company’s environmental practices or policies, according to a new survey conducted by Corporate Express U.S.

The survey gauged the attitudes and opinions of 7,660 office employees about the increasing trend of U.S. companies to incorporate environmentally friendly practices in the workplace. Respondents hailed from a wide array of industries — and ranged in position from the CEO level to administrative office assistants. According to the survey, American preferences toward environmental safeguards in the office continue to increase. The survey found that:

- Approximately two out of three workers at companies without environmental policies would like to see such policies implemented in their office
- 83 percent of employees would like to see their companies use environmentally friendly cleaning chemicals in their offices
- Nearly one in three workers say they possess allergies that are aggravated by environmental conditions in their offices.

Demand for environmentally focused products has increased steadily over the past 10 years — with most respondents (60 percent) reporting that the environmental policies at their companies have been implemented within the last decade. In fact, the trend reflects workers’ personal habits at home — with 78 percent of respondents indicating they recycle at home and 51 percent of respondents indicating they use environmentally friendly cleaning products at home.

“It’s here and if you are trying to hide from it, that time is no more,” says Felicia Laconi, director, facilities supplies, and marketing at Corporate Express. “A trend in facilities will be more organizations adopting products that maintain a full Green lifecycle because customers are becoming more aware, and they will inquire about how products are made and what happens to them after they are finished with them. As the baby boomers come out of the workplace, the next generations will come into leadership, and sustainability will be a key component of their strategy for how facilities are operated.”

Ralph Bianculli, president and CEO of Paradigm Group, a full service supply distribution, facilities products manufacturing, warehouse packaging and marketing consulting company, agrees, “Green has got legs to it. There’s a lot of momentum to the Green movement and decision makers in the facilities’ channels are becoming younger and more concerned about the environmental issues. It’s the right business decision and that’s what’s driving the trend.”

Increased industry segments receptive

As product usage increases, so do the segments that are using these products. According to Mike Sawchuk, vice president, general manager at Enviro-Solutions, paying attention to business segments such as education, healthcare, BSCs, hospitality, government, big business and approaching fast — retail — will reap its benefits in the near future.

Consumers/end users are driving the demand based on improving health and the fact that there are real economic advantages. “Parents today are more knowledgeable. They are concerned about the types of cleaning products in schools to make it a healthier environment for their children,” says Sawchuk. “That knowledge of the improved health and economics in turn is creating an opportunity for the astute commercial building manager to be receptive to going Green.”

Healthcare is being driven by the public reading about the health effects in chemicals. Hospitality segments are being driven by the customers who are making the choice to stay at a hotel based on Green cleaning practices.

“In Canada, some hotels participate in the Green Leaf Program, a program which verifies the occupant is staying at a hotel proven more sustainable,” says Sawchuk. “Occupancy rates, increased human health and other economic factors are driving the movement to Certified Green Cleaning products.”

At the root of the Green trend is the education of users, which will continue to drive implementation

and execution. "The biggest problem regarding Green products is at the facility management level," notes Bianculli. "They don't understand the products that are out there. There is a deep lack of knowledge on the products available and the largest learning curve is at the end-user level."

The Paradigm Group is in the process of building an intelligence platform for end users. Paradigm recently rolled out Green Intelligence on its website, www.paradigm-grp.com, and as of this writing, is logging 6,000 hits daily.

"The end users are desperate for good information, and it will ultimately change the pipeline for distributors of Green products," says Bianculli. "We're taking a serious position on this, spending time and money, to build a Web presence of nonbiased information to bring the end users and the supply channel together."

Greening affects your customer's bottom line

While some end users perceive the transition to Green products as cost prohibitive, it doesn't have to be. Bianculli says the first initial budgetary pain occurs without the proper education, but it's something that can be taught.

"Ultimately, the channel provider needs to help educate the facility manager," says Bianculli. "It's good for any distribution company to bring the variety of facts to the customer and let the customer make the decision. The facts, however, have to be thorough. If you can show the facility manager they will be saving money, getting an ROI for their investment in 12 to 13 months and reduce material usage by 30 percent, corporate America will be making the decision not from the budgets, but pushing from the top down because they have to. While a transition to Green products may cost a little money, it's short term.

"We find it easy to show end users what it takes, and 77 percent of the time we can demonstrate why it's cost-effective to make the transition," adds Bianculli. "There is a distorted truth that going Green costs more."

For example, Corporate Express shows the payback with their Sustainable Earth line of products which are shipped highly concentrated. By doing so, end users only need to use 1 oz. of product to make a gallon of cleaner. "The measure of payback the end user needs to get used to is the cost of use, not just the cost of the product purchase," says Laconi. "It's pennies per gallon of use. End users need to have an easy-to-use system to get rid of the bad 'glug, glug' habits. More is not better; more is wasteful. It takes experience from using the product to understand that."

Laconi says the responsibility lies with both manufacturers and distributors to put it forth in that way. Cost in use needs to be documented and it needs to be given to the end user.

Training is critical

For distributors, becoming the local Green expert should be your goal. Training from your manufacturer representative is key to achieving this goal.

"What we've learned is the majority of distributors we visit, most are not successful in selling Green or using Green products to grow their market share," notes Sawchuk. "They aren't optimizing their existing customers, nor are they creating for themselves a strategic differentiation opportunity (being the local Green expert) and using that to go after the customers of their competitors and growing incremental customers and market share. For the most part, most don't really know how to sell Green."

The question then has to be asked, "What are you going to do differently to allow you to be successful?"

"As a manufacturer, we have to prove the performance characteristics. Then we need to give them (distributors) the confidence to engage in the Green talk — where to sell it, how to sell it, common objections, ways to overcome those objections. The distributor needs to know more than his/her competitor does in the Green area," Sawchuk explains.

Sawchuk advises distributors to solve existing cleaning challenges with Green alternatives and give demonstrations of Green products that will work as well or better than conventional products.

Continued education is needed

As a distributor, are you as successful as you would like to be in selling or using Green in your local marketplace? If the answer is no, then what will you and your incumbent manufacturers do different? If the answer is nothing, just try harder; that will not ensure success. Continued education, embracing, absorbing and digesting all the information you can is very important for success in selling Green products.

Laconi says the way manufacturers can attack the education issue is through experience. "It's really a different sales approach. We have to get it out into their hands and have them work with it. As

an industry, we have to bring knowledge experts closer to the customer," she advises. "The industry as a whole does not view that as a vitally important aspect to their job. Understanding it, wading through the data and focusing on customer events that put Green out front will help the process."

If end users say they don't really care whether they use a Green product, Laconi contends distributors need to discuss the performance characteristics of the product. "Green products have to perform. If the manufacturer and distributor are not focused on that aspect, it's 'greenwashing' and it's a waste of money. First and foremost, you have to realize it's not just about being Green; it's about finding a better way to do the work that cleaning crews are doing everyday in a more sustainable manner."

What's on the horizon?

If you attended the ISSA show in Orlando last October, you would have noticed the vast variety of Green products — from chemicals to equipment. This trend is expected to continue in a big way. If you're not carrying a line of Green products, your competitor most likely is and you'll miss out on profitable benefits they may provide.

Over the next 12 months, the Paradigm Group is expecting Green product categories to double over the next 12 months. "Our stats from the Paradigm Group are currently at 7.5 percent. We're anticipating it to double by this time next year. If that forecast is correct, it's a huge jump. Three to four years ago, the number was at 3 to 4 percent," notes Bianculli.

Certification will also continue to increase. "The industry is going to see a greater acceptance of Green certification as a necessity and more Green product categories," Sawchuk adds. "These two facts will drive a significant increase in manufacturers seeking certification for their products and the number of Green certified products available."

Additionally, the industry will see the growth of Green certified bio-enzymatic products as well as Green certified bio-preferred products.

Corporate Express has plans to develop products outside the lines that the industry is used to seeing. "I think wherever the greatest energy is expended, the industry is going to see the most development and growth," Laconi says. "For example, floor care is a very large industry where a lot of manpower is spent. At Corporate Express, we go where the energy is being used."

Clearly, the state of Green products in the jan/san industry is alive. It's up to manufacturers and distributors to continue to seek out ways to stay current on the latest developments in product and process.

"The time is now to understand how this affects the industry. Manufacturers and distributors in this space really have an effect on the organizations regardless of the type," Laconi says. "It's incumbent on us as an industry to realize the effectiveness and the reach we have. The more education we can provide to the industry — the better off we'll be." **MS**

