

Green And The Economy

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Feature

A leading authority in green cleaning assesses how financial hardships impact the movement.

CM/Spotlight: Sustainability

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To hear former Vice President Al Gore tell it, becoming greener and more environmentally responsible is the answer to just about all of our country's major problems.

In an April 2009 presentation in Chicago, Gore, arguably the world's foremost environmentalist (or at least the most well-known), argued that taking steps to protect the environment and become more sustainable could provide a problem-solving "thread" that would weave through our country's security, environmental and economic problems, solving most of them.

For instance, Gore believes that as we invest in sustainable forms of energy, such as wind and solar power, and turn away from fossil fuels, the billions of dollars now spent on oil will be available to advance America, creating new jobs and new technologies and helping to make our country safer.

In fact, he believes going green will be one of the key job creators of the 21st century, and that it should be an area in which America leads the way.

What About Today?

This is all well and good, but many of the possibilities and opportunities Gore advocates, although advancing much more rapidly now than ever before, are still several years away from real-world use; however, building service contractors (BSCs), janitorial distributors and manufacturers are concerned today.

With the economy teetering between recession and depression, those in the cleaning industry need to know if green cleaning and sustainability are still viable trends, especially now that their customers seem to be making cost-cutting a primary goal.

If the economy deteriorates further, some in the cleaning industry may even wonder if greening was a journey taken unnecessarily.

Still A Green Niche?

When green cleaning first began to have an impact on the professional cleaning industry a few years ago, the most forward-looking, astute industry players typically embraced it first.

Many not only believed in the concept, but also saw greening as a niche marketing opportunity that could open new doors and attract new clients.

Soon, virtually all manufacturers and janitorial distributors began to produce and sell green cleaning products, and many BSCs started to offer environmentally preferable cleaning services.

In fact, in recent years in many settings, green cleaning has become a prerequisite rather than a niche market.

More and more private and public facilities have made the use of environmentally preferable cleaning products and effective cleaning practices a necessary component of winning their business.

Now, due to the economic tailspin, most of those same facilities are experiencing moderate to substantial financial difficulties, resulting in all forms of business contraction, including job layoffs and plant, warehouse and office closings.

Many would assume that green cleaning would no longer be a primary concern for such businesses.

In fact, with money tight and the economy so uncertain, holding on to the old ways of doing business, including the use of conventional cleaning products, is a natural response.

Because green cleaning has historically been customer driven, some in our industry may now question — and reasonably so — if investing more time, funds and energy in this area is still financially viable.

Lessons Learned

Our current recession has been described as the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

And, although past recessions have had only a minimal impact on our industry, it is no longer possible to refer to the professional cleaning industry as "recession proof."

This means that when our industry moves in new directions, such as embracing environmentally preferable cleaning products and effective cleaning practices, the reasoning behind the decision must encompass more than simply niche marketing.

Any new direction must have a foundation that will allow it to weather economic ups and downs and offer real value to our industry and the end customers we serve.

Fortunately, for those of us who have long advocated the use of environmentally preferable cleaning products, green cleaning does have such a foundation.

Numerous studies show a strong correlation between the use of green cleaning products and effective cleaning practices with improved human and environmental health.

Some of the reported improvements include that effective green cleaning:

- Helped decrease air pollution, water pollution, ozone depletion and global climate change
- Helped reduce health problems, such as illnesses and seasonal allergies resulting from the exposure to allergens, viruses, bacteria and dust, that may be contaminated with heavy metals, pesticides, volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and other materials which can harm health
- Increased worker productivity, efficiency, quality, satisfaction and retention as well as improved student performance on standardized tests and reduced absenteeism
- Helped reduce risks and costs to building management, tenants and/or the janitorial company, including costs associated with sick leave, health care and productivity loss
- Enhanced an organization's reputation and brand equity, because being socially conscious has become a desirable business trait.

Where Do We Go From Here?

By all indications, most of our industry's end customers realize that green cleaning has significant value — the kind of strong foundation described earlier — and is worth pursuing even in the midst of our economic turmoil.

This assumption is further bolstered by the fact that America, if not most of the world, is becoming much more environmentally conscious than ever before.

However, there probably will be some customers that put the transfer to green cleaning on hold for now, only to revisit it once the economy and other conditions improve or become more stable.

Those manufacturers that have devoted considerable time, research and funds to developing green cleaning products should continue to receive dividends from their investments for years to come.

And for distributors and BSCs who have invested in training and developing true expertise to help their end customers, the market for environmentally preferable cleaning products and services will continue to grow.

However, BSCs may need to be more selective, at least during this economic downturn, regarding the types of customers they choose to market to or serve.

For instance, government facilities, school districts and universities, the hotel and hospitality industries and the health care industry are still moving forward with greening their cleaning; in fact, in many cases, they have even accelerated their movement in this direction.

Green cleaning is now one of the pillars of our industry.

There is no turning back or walking away from it.

As the economy improves, this movement will likely grow and become even stronger and, just as in the past, those producing, marketing and implementing effective green cleaning programs will reap the benefits.

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