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Green Seal sees revolution continuing

Shift to green products and practices only the beginning for JanSan industry.

By Arthur B. Weissman

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Like a number of other industries, but probably ahead of many, the JanSan industry is in the midst of a cultural revolution.

Accepted practices of the past 50 years with respect to chemicals, equipment, supplies and procedures are being challenged and replaced by so-called green products and procedures, which have a more healthful effect on human beings and the environment in their production, use and end-of-life.

As with any major shift, the outcome is difficult to predict, and the uncertainty surrounding the present and future can be unsettling, especially for those who do not educate themselves about what is involved in this change.

In this article, we give our vision of where the JanSan industry is heading with respect to green cleaning. Hopefully, a clearer idea of what may be in store will ease the anxieties many industry professionals feel.

A definition of green cleaning

Green Seal is currently completing an environmental standard for cleaning services, and this standard will provide in detail the many aspects involved in green cleaning, including the use of chemicals, supplies, equipment, procedures, training and communications.

By green cleaning, we mean the use of products and procedures that are more healthful and have less environmental impact than others that serve the same function.

Thus, for example, green cleaning would employ a green cleaning chemical and use appropriate procedures in its application to ensure safety, minimal health and environmental exposure, and material efficiency.

Immediate future

The green cleaning future is, in a real sense, already here: More and more independently identified or certified green chemicals, supplies and equipment are in the marketplace and are being used every day by cleaning services.

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Look for continued propagation of these materials in the next few years, as more chemical manufacturers sign up for certification of their hard-surface cleaners, carpet cleaners, floor finishes, floor strippers, hand cleaners and other major product groups.

Supplies such as bathroom tissue and towels and equipment such as vacuum cleaners are also going green, though at a lesser rate.

Lagging behind are better procedures and the manuals and guidance to promote them.

In many cases, these environmental and health-related procedures are synonymous with industry best practices.

We know of some major and small cleaning services that are pioneering in best practices, but the industry as a whole has a distance to go.

Hopefully, the imminent issuance of the Green Seal cleaning service standard will catalyze acceptance and implementation of green procedures to complement the green materials.

Thus, suppliers seem to be ahead in adopting green designs and formulations for products and equipment, while services are catching up in using these green products.

This gap should narrow significantly in the next few years as services adopt green cleaning and seek to get certified as green.

We often hear industry professionals complain that their clients are not asking for green cleaning, and this may be true apart from some major institutions (governmental, educational) that are aware of green cleaning and adopt it as part of their commitment to sustainable operations.

But, as with any culture change, it is everyone's responsibility to educate those who do not know about the advantages of green cleaning, and increasingly services will be in the position of offering a service their clients cannot reasonably refuse.

With the growing acceptance and demand for green cleaning products and services, there may continue to be an increase in the number of programs that purport to identify them.

While this may make things more confusing for purchasers, end users and manufacturers alike, it does indicate a heightened interest in greening, which puts more focus on the criteria being used and the credibility of the organizations behind them.

Over time, those programs that are not truly dedicated to making the marketplace more sustainable should fall out of circulation.

In the longer-term

Where is all this going? Is green cleaning fad or future?

Of course, we believe the latter, and our vision reflects this.

Underlying it is the assumption that no one would reject a service that is more healthful and efficient and performs as well.

The only wild card here is cost, but, as with most cleaning chemicals, we believe the

cost of green cleaning will be comparable to that of conventional cleaning, and may even be less eventually, as reductions in waste, liabilities, and injuries become internalized.

We see a future where green cleaning programs are commonplace among large service providers and many smaller ones.

It may take a decade or two for green cleaning to become the norm, but that will happen, too, and for the same reasons.

Moreover, providers will tire of offering two different kinds of cleaning services, and since their companies and employees benefit from green cleaning, they will eventually switch over entirely.

The supply of institutional green cleaning services will be spurred by increasing demand in the marketplace, led by the green building movement and an increasing consciousness of the health effects of our built environment and the products used around us, particularly cleaning chemicals.

In this regard, look for an exponential growth of green cleaning in the residential market, where family and health issues are paramount.

Long before then, Green Seal will hopefully have in place an environmental standard for residential cleaning services that can be used to identify bona fide green cleaning in this market.

Ultimately, we would hope to see a connection between cleaning and product design, so that the latter not only facilitates the former, but actually reduces the need for it.

New technologies

Entries can be made into soil sinks with the development of far more sophisticated technologies than the current walk-on mats (like electrostatic charges, vacuums and other means).

Ventilation systems can be improved to screen out smaller particles that would reduce the dust load.

And bathroom fixtures are ripe for redesign — along the lines of the waterless urinal — to reduce not only resource use but soiling and cleaning requirements.

Hands-free fixtures mean there are fewer surfaces to disinfectant, and self-cleaning equipment can prevent build-up of scale and soils.

In conclusion, Green Seal envisions the steady transformation of the JanSan industry into a technological leader that will promote health and a more sustainable environment.

Green cleaning in the first decade of this century is the harbinger of bigger things to come.

Arthur B. Weissman is president and CEO of Green Seal Inc.

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