



Defining Green and Sustainability

Sorting through the green and sustainable lexicon

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February 2011

In 2007, 67 percent of *Housekeeping Solutions* readers commented that they used green cleaning products within their facility. By 2010, that number jumped to 86 percent. What's even more impressive though, only 50 percent of readers surveyed in 2007 commented that they would do whatever they could to incorporate green products into their programs. In 2010, that number shot up to 88 percent.

As green cleaning and sustainable initiatives continue to evolve and gain momentum with in-house departments, it can become difficult for managers to navigate the lexicon of changing terms.

The federal government defines green as "products and services that reduce the health and environmental impacts as compared to other products and services used for the same purpose." Custodial managers know that incorporating these products and methods into a green cleaning program will help improve the health and environment of a building and its occupants.

However, confusion often arises when it becomes necessary for managers to go beyond green products and define product certifications, product life cycle,

greenwashing or biobased products, to name a few. Here, common terms and phrases that have caused confusion over the years are defined to help managers clarify green and sustainable best practices with confidence.

Refresher Course

Not all terminology associated with green and sustainability is new to custodial managers. In fact, sometimes all that's needed is a refresher course and some clarification on what they already know.

BIOBASED PRODUCTS — Defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as "a product that is composed, in whole or in significant part, of biological products or renewable domestic agricultural materials (including plant, animal and marine materials) or forestry materials." Some common ingredients in biobased cleaning products include citrus, coconut, corn, lavender and parsley.

It is important to note that not all biobased products are green and not all green products are biobased. For instance, while the ingredient in a product may be naturally derived, one also has to consider the

toxicity, packaging and the manufacturing process.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE PURCHASING — Purchasing products or services that have a lesser or reduced effect on human health and the environment when compared with competing products or services that serve the same purpose.

LEED — The [U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design](#) is a rating system and certification program for facilities. Due to consistent updates made to the program, there are now nine different types of certifications available, six of which pertain to the jan/san professional — LEED for Existing Buildings: Operations & Maintenance (scheduled for revisions in 2012), LEED for Commercial Interiors, LEED for Schools, LEED for Retail, LEED for Healthcare and LEED for New Construction. Each category of certification has specific requirements outlined pertaining to custodial departments. In addition to those requirements, there are supplementary cleaning tasks that can help earn points towards certifications.

Still Causing Confusion

Although green cleaning is a concept in-house departments are accustomed to and familiar with, there is still some confusion when talking specifics. For instance, what is the difference between cleaning for health and indoor air quality? Is green really different from sustainability? These questions, as well as others, are answered in the following descriptions.

CLEANING FOR HEALTH — Some confuse this with indoor air quality, but IAQ only addresses exposure to cleaning through

inhalation, which is just part of the cleaning for health concept.

"There are three routes of exposure: inhalation, ingestion and absorption through the skin," says Steve Ashkin, president of [The Ashkin Group](#) and [The Sustainability Dashboard](#). "Inhalation is important, but it is only one part of the equation. Cleaning for health looks at all the issues."

The cleaning for health concept claims that cleaning has value beyond the aesthetic, and can positively impact human health and the environment by reducing exposure to chemicals, improving indoor air quality, and reducing germs that prevent disease, allergic reaction and infection for building occupants and cleaning crews. What speaks to management: the cleaning for health concept has shown to increase worker productivity and reduce absenteeism.

ECO-LABELING — An eco-label is a logo of which is affixed to a product that suggests green or sustainability. Common labels include those from [EcoLogo](#), [Green Seal](#), [Carpet and Rug Institute](#) or the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#), to name a few. Manufacturers might also put their own eco-labels on products, which is called self-certification.

Purchasers are advised to research eco-labels to confirm the accuracy of green claims. This is often easily done as many certifying bodies provide lists of products carrying their labels, as well as those fraudulently making claims.

GREENWASHING — [TerraChoice](#) and [EcoLogo](#) coined the formal definition for greenwashing as "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental

practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.”

As the green initiative took off, independent third-party certifications became necessary to differentiate a green product from one with no environmental benefit. In addition to certifications, Green Guides were introduced by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to control and clarify the terms manufacturers used to market their products as green.

Proposed revisions to these guidelines are currently being reviewed to ensure that manufacturer environmental advertising and labeling claims comply with the law and do not mislead buyers. Changes to the agency's Green Guides include new guidance on marketers' use of product certifications and seals of approval, "renewable energy" claims, "renewable materials" claims and "carbon offset" claims. Those that do not comply are considered to be greenwashing.

According to TerraChoice, developers of the [Greenwashing Report](#) and [The Seven Sins of Greenwashing](#), more than 95 percent of consumer products claiming to be green were found to commit at least one of the "Sins of Greenwashing."

LIFE CYCLE — The life cycle of a product is a concept that recognizes the product's impact on the environment not only during usage, but across its entire life cycle. This includes everything from the extraction of raw materials to the manufacturing process, transportation and recycling or disposal of the product. The term cradle to grave (the cradle representing where the raw materials came from and the grave representing disposal after use, according to Ashkin) is often used in conjunction with life cycle, but should not be confused with cradle to cradle.

Cradle to cradle is used to explain a product that incorporates a sustainable life cycle, but as oppose to being disposed of, is instead recycled into or reused as a product of equal or greater quality. An example of this is taking the motor out of an old piece of floor care equipment and using it in a newer model that is then reintroduced into the workforce.

RADICAL TRANSPARENCY — This is a relatively new term used in the jan/san industry and is formally defined as "a management method where nearly all decision making is carried out publicly." In other words, radical transparency is when manufacturers honestly and completely disclose sustainable processes and product ingredients — i.e. no secrets.

SELF-CERTIFICATION — To self-certify is when a manufacturer develops their own set of certifying criteria and a certification label that confirms achievement of that criteria. Tests are often not conducted by a third party but results and additional details such as life cycle studies and inspections of operations, are traditionally made available. Purchasing agents are encouraged to review these results when determining the product's viability for a particular cleaning program. Some experts consider this a form of greenwashing, but others comment that radical transparency will support self-certification claims.

SUSTAINABILITY — The concept of sustainability is often confused with or used in conjunction with green. The main difference, though, is that green is defined by products and/or services. Sustainability is defined as a process that "meet the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainability minimizes cleanings

impact on people and the environment, but more importantly, it is a process, not a product.

For instance, a green certified paper towel (a product) often consists of recycled fibers from previously cut-down trees. A manufacturer practices sustainability (a process) by planting a new tree for each that is used in the development of that paper towel, replenishing forests for future generations.

"There is no such thing as a sustainable product," says Ashkin. "Sustainability addresses how products are made or used. It is about the triple bottom line: environmental aspects, financial aspects and social equity."

New/Revised Certifications

To help in-house managers navigate the green and sustainable lexicon, third-party certifiers have developed — and in some cases already revised — product, personal, departmental and facility certifications. The goal is to create standards for which the industry can use as a benchmark to drive green and sustainable cleaning initiatives forward.

Descriptions and links to additional information pertaining to these third-party certifications can be found [here](#).