The Evolution of Green Cleaning

09.04.2014
Karen Holmes
800.874.0780
marketing@abm.com
abm.com
When Green Cleaning Wasn’t Even a Buzzword

Today, smart businesses recognize the health and economic benefits of green cleaning. Yet, not so very long ago, the practice seemed light-years away from being a practical reality.

Now it’s more than buzz. Green building and maintenance is a minimum requirement for responsible businesses and organizations. According to the president, CEO and founding chairman of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), Rick Fedrizzi, “Green buildings provide operational performance, environmental sensitivity and improved health for their occupants. It’s a triple bottom line great companies can relate to.”

Cave Men Got it Right

Where did it all begin? Sustainable design—or building with the ecological environment in mind—dates back to early man. They lived in caves or built shelters of stone, wood, mud and grasses. When abandoned, the man-made shelters would eventually return to the natural ecosystem. Over time, however, building materials changed, and structures could withstand harsher conditions. As a result, buildings no longer recycled themselves back to nature. In addition, we began to require larger and stronger buildings for business and industry. The manufacturing of building materials and the energy consumption of massive structures placed an enormous strain on the environment.

The term “conservation,” which came into existence in the late 19th century, means the management of natural resources. By the 1960s, alarming research showed the harm that chemicals inflicted on the environment. The energy crisis of the ’70s caused people to question the wisdom of relying on fossil fuels for transportation and buildings. Architects began paying closer attention to designs that were more ecologically friendly. Eventually this practice became known as “green building.”

From Sick Buildings to Healthy Buildings: LEED

In 2000, the USGBC developed the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System (LEED), which certifies buildings that meeting strict criteria. The LEED system grew to include not just new commercial buildings, but existing buildings, interiors, homes and neighborhood developments. In 2014, the USGBC stated, “LEED certification is recognized across the globe as the premier mark of achievement in green building…. Every day, 1.7 million square feet of space is certified using LEED in more than 150 countries and territories.” Points are awarded for green cleaning and other practices that can be implemented by state-of-the-art janitorial companies.
While not every real estate developer has jumped on the green building bandwagon, the results from the early adopters have shown its true value. Federal and state governments have mandated green practices in government buildings. Many smaller businesses that might not seek LEED certification have nonetheless embraced green cleaning as an important factor in creating a healthier environment for employees, customers, students and other occupants.

**Product and Equipment Advances**

Earth-friendly cleaning products are on par with their conventional counterparts in both effectiveness and price. Even in 2006, an article in Real Estate Weekly stated, “As the industry has become more aware of the benefits of green cleaning, the products have significantly improved.” Robert Kravitz, President of Altura Solutions wrote in 2013, “In recent years, green cleaning products have become very cost competitive with conventional products. Further, many administrators now refer to green cleaning products as ‘cost neutral.’ There are many reasons for this. Some green products are so concentrated that even though they do cost more initially, they last longer and go farther, eliminating the cost differential.”

In addition, technological advances in cleaning equipment—such as vacuum cleaners and even dusting cloths—have made these tools better for the environment and more efficient. When you factor in the other benefits listed below to determine the true cost, green cleaning can more than pay for itself in the long run.

**The Benefits**

Green cleaning programs promote health, safety and social consciousness. Processes focus on improving indoor air quality, recycling, and minimizing the use of raw materials and toxic products that require disposal.

Green cleaning can:

- Help decrease air pollution, water pollution, ozone depletion and global climate change.
- Help reduce health problems associated with allergens, chemical sensitivities and contaminants, such as mold and bacteria. Green cleaning products contain low VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) levels that emit fewer fumes and are gentler on the facility itself.
- Increase worker satisfaction, improve morale, reduce absenteeism, and increase productivity, efficiency and retention. These statistics are well documented.
- Help reduce costs to building management, tenants, and/or the janitorial company, including costs associated with sick leave, health care, and productivity loss. In addition, green cleaning practitioners use energy-efficient equipment and focus on preventative maintenance to reduce expenses.
- Enhance an organization’s reputation and brand equity, because being socially conscious has become highly valued.

Resources Abound

Twenty years ago, few resources existed on green building and cleaning. Today information is readily available through many organizations, including the USGBC, American Planning Association, Center for Renewable Energy and Sustainable Technology, Sustainable Industry Buildings Council, the Unified Green Cleaning Alliance and more. Conferences, such as the Greenbuild International Conference and Expo, annually attract thousands who come to learn the latest on green products and services through educational tracks and exhibits. In addition, large janitorial companies specialize in green cleaning and offer expertise in planning and implementing customized programs. And if you still require more information, an online search for “green cleaning practices” will return about 20 million results.

While some building owners and property managers may think it’s not easy being green, they will soon find out that information, resources and expert providers are available today to implement green cleaning programs in big or small steps. In fact, green is the only way to go if you consider what George Burns once said, “I look to the future because that’s where I’m going to spend the rest of my life.”