

2007/07: What Does It Really Mean to Clean Green?

contributed by Claudia Lezell, SSI, CTC, RFI, SCI, CWFI, ASID* [instructor, The Flooring Technology Institute / interior designer / industry overachiever]

By definition, Green Cleaning is cleaning to protect public health without harming the environment. This is a relatively basic definition, yet complex in implementation. Not only are we now asked to understand Green, LEED, and Sustainable Design issues, but we face yet another challenge: understanding how to "Clean Green";

Where and how does one begin to understand such complexities? A good place to start is to obtain a better understanding of "Green" in general by referencing some of the resources I listed in my previous article, "What Does It Mean to Be Green?"; The next step actually begins with you, the specifier.

Floored By Poor Specifications

Repeatedly, I go out on floor covering inspections regarding soiling and maintenance related conditions where a product(s) was chosen based on LEED points or - worse yet - strictly for aesthetics and not for performance. For example: The installation of a heavy textured floor covering material - which is difficult to clean by design - in a very light color in a high-traffic walk path located just off an asphalt-coated parking garage. (Destined to fail.)

With the complexities of Green, LEED, Sustainable Design, and the various types of floor covering available in the market place today, now - more than ever - the specifier must understand not only the floor covering categories and characteristics, but also basic maintenance procedures for these products. By choosing a product that is difficult to clean and/or not ever able to be cleaned, you are actually causing harm to the indoor environment's inhabitants and providing no benefit to the life cycle cost of the home or building.

Squeaky Clean Can Be Green

But don't worry - there is hope! In order to help promote the green cleaning process throughout the entire anticipated life cycle of the floor covering material, check out these resources and follow these tips:

• Focus on the entryways, inside and out. One important goal in cleaning green is to trap and remove dirt and pollutants before they enter the building by frequently cleaning the entrances and entryway mats.

• Make careful selections of floor covering materials, focusing on:

- the traffic type that will be received
- the difficulty level of cleaning the material by skilled (or, more frequently, unskilled laborers)
- safety (do not forget soil can become very slippery even when coating over a non-cleaned slip resistant material).

• Avoid blending various types of floor covering that each demand specialty cleaning techniques. For example, inserting a glass brick into a granite flamed floor. Yes, it looks wonderful when it is installed, but when the floor receives its first round of traffic, then what? How and who can possibly maintain it?

• Ensure proper vacuuming, extraction, rinsing and drying of carpets. Carpet can be a host for moisture problems and mold growth if not maintained correctly. Green cleaning means minimizing these problems. The Carpet and Rug Institute [CRI] has a very extensive Green Label program in place for vacuum cleaners, cleaning chemicals, and cleaning equipment.

• Use green cleaning chemicals, supplies and equipment, as well as cleaning procedures that follow the Green Seal Standards. Green Seal is an independent, non-profit organization that sets environmental standards for product categories and certifies that products that meet those standards.

• Promote the use of higher quality mops and microfiber technology. New technology has made microfibers even finer than silk. The material used in cleaning products, such as mops and dust cloths, is a blend of microscopic polyester and polyamide fibers split into microscopic fibers in order to create microscopic "hooks". These hooks act as claws, scraping up and holding dust, dirt, and grime.

Green Washing When Washing Up

Be careful with how loose the term "recycled content and recovered content" are used to promote products. Understand the following definitions before making choices based on recycled content:

• Post consumer materials: Materials that have served their intended use as a consumer item and have been diverted or recovered from waste destined for disposal. They are used in recycling and part of the broader category of "recovered materials." A good example of this as it relates to floor covering is the use of plastic bottles in fiber production for carpet.

• Recovered materials: Materials that have been recovered or diverted from solid waste to be recycled for other use.

• Recycled content: The amount or percent of recovered materials that finished product contains.

Keep in mind that some manufacturers "reuse" their waste or "trim bi-product" created during the actual manufacturing process by adding this material back into the mix instead of getting rid of this waste bi-product. Yes, this practice definitely helps with sustainability and the concept of "green", but it does not necessarily fit the definitions cited above.

Lean Towards Green

Remember, before you can serve your client effectively, you must EDUCATE yourself and understand what it means to go green. An important step to take is to gain a comprehensive understanding of 1) the various types of floor covering products, 2) the maintenance implications behind them, and 3) the kind of traffic they will reasonably sustain.

Lastly, now that you know that going green is more than just simply switching from traditional cleaning chemicals to environmentally-friendly products, a well-implemented, effective program has to take almost a holistic approach, which proactively involves your client, facility manager, building occupants, and visitors, as well as the indoor and outdoor environments. It's a new way of thinking, but you'll be smarter for it.

Note: A version of this article appeared in the May/June 2007 issue of Angle, ASID Texas Gulf Coast chapter's newsletter.