

Green when ‘green’ is tight

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Sustainability

Are current cash woes influencing the green cleaning market?

by: Robert Kravitz

Historically, the professional cleaning industry is considered immune to economic downturns.

However, after 9/11 and subsequent events, as well as recent global affairs, the professional cleaning industry realized it was no longer impervious.

Though impacted, our industry certainly did not feel the slowdown’s wrath, unlike the real estate, auto, travel, or other industries.

According to some building service contractors (BSCs), what appeared to happen after 9/11, as well as during some previous economic declines, was that customers started taking bids and look for ways to reduce their cleaning costs and overhead.

It is likely that same process will occur now as the current downturn begins to impact company bottom lines.

And, the slowdown presents some unique challenges for BSCs who have converted their cleaning systems from conventional to green.

Will customers pay more to go green? Do they believe green does cost more? Will they consider the health and environmental benefits of green cleaning when selecting a cleaning contractor, or will price be the only consideration?

Should contractors who have decided to go green return to conventional cleaning?

These are definite concerns because many end customers still view green cleaning and other environmental initiatives as costly.

According to a 2005 survey conducted by Turner Construction Co. — one of the largest construction companies in the world — most of the 665 senior executives believed building and operating a green facility was more costly than a conventional building.

Further, nearly half said they were unable to “quantify” the benefits or costs of building and operating green.

In some ways, the economic downturn could place the industry at a tipping point.

However, what is apparent is that neither the industry nor the end customers want to return to older, more conventional cleaning methods and systems.

Sell solutions

So how should BSCs, and more specifically green BSCs, market their services in a tough economic market?

According to Mike Schaffer, president of Tornado Industries®, a manufacturer of professional cleaning equipment, end users are not just looking to cut costs, but rather they are searching for solutions to cleaning problems.

“Selling in a slump means you have to sell solutions,” says Schaffer.

Schaffer adds that green BSCs must come armed with materials, such as articles, studies and publications, promoting the benefits of green cleaning and they should view green cleaning as a solution to improving worker productivity, reducing absenteeism and bolstering the bottom line.

For instance, a recent study found that at the green cleaned and LEED-certified PNC Firstside Center in Pittsburgh, PA, employee turnover had decreased by 27 percent compared to an 11 percent drop in a similar non-green building.

Several similar studies are available and also indicate that building and operating green, which includes incorporating green cleaning products and systems, typically costs considerably less than was previously believed and it has a much greater return on investment than people once realized.

Additionally, some of the products used for green cleaning tend to be less expensive in the long run when compared to conventional products — a cost savings that can be passed on to the client.

This is because green chemicals tend to be highly concentrated so they typically last longer than conventional chemicals and are often shipped in larger containers to cut costs.

Further, healthier, more advanced cleaning equipment, such as extractors, floor machines, battery-operated equipment, and vacuum cleaners, also tend to be of higher quality, which reduces down time and replacement costs.

And, some of the principals and methods of green cleaning can actually save the client money.

For instance, one goal of green floor care is to reduce refinishing (stripping/recoating) cycles.

Environmentally responsible products, procedures and equipment help accomplish this.

And, because floor care is costly and labor intensive, it is a big savings for the client.

Build relationships with value

Many of today's customer-BSC relationships are barely relationships at all.

The cleaning professionals come in to clean at night and unless there is a problem or a complaint, they are given very little thought.

However, green cleaning has changed this because facility managers and building tenants are usually much more involved in the cleaning process.

According to Schaffer, customers are much better educated today on their building's cleaning needs.

As a result, they want to get more active in their building's health and operations and appreciate

working with BSCs who are “the green experts” in the community.

In the process, the relationship they build has value, which can compensate for any additional costs.

“When a service has value for a customer, it can override price concerns,” says Schaffer. “Being valuable to the customer, regardless of their budget size or circumstances, makes the BSC a much more integral part of their building’s operations. They see the BSC as helping the company weather the tough times, instead of just being an added expense.”

According to Schaffer, businesses all over North America are currently looking for stability.

Is green cleaning a necessity for these companies during uncertain times?

That depends on the facility, no matter what their budget is or what peripheral economic conditions exist.

But, all indications are that green is the future of this industry.

Further, green does add value and provides enough economic benefits that even if it costs a little more than conventional cleaning, the added expense is justified in relation to the benefits gained.

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