

Eminently Emerald (Part 2 of 2)

With Consumer Interest in Using Green Services Continuing to Rise, Is Now the Time to Enviro-Evaluate Your Operation from Front to Back?

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CHICAGO — Not so long ago, when you looked up “green” in the dictionary, there was a brief definition about color or pigment. Today, it’s difficult to read or hear the word “green” without also thinking of the environment, of conservation, of sustainability. And your customers are thinking about it, too.

INTEREST IN GREEN SERVICES ON RISE

Wherever you stand on running a green business, it’s worth noting that some of the latest research shows that consumers are just as interested in patronizing green services such as drycleaners as they are about purchasing green products.

Mintel, a leading global supplier of consumer, product and media intelligence, reports that consumer interest in green services doubled from 2008 to 2010. Thirty-four percent of consumers say they take into account the “greenness” of their drycleaner, compared to just 12% in 2008.

“The rapid increase in consumer interest was likely facilitated by increased availability of ‘greener’ alternatives in many service industries and increased marketing of ‘green’ practices by service providers,” says Fiona O’Donnell, Mintel senior analyst. “Marketing relating to environmental issues, large and small, is now a common practice by hotels, drycleaners and home-improvement contractors.”

Consumers are also concerned about how companies define “green.” Forty percent would prefer to purchase green products from a company that has a clear set of standards for what exactly green is, research shows.

“Less than half of consumers say they don’t know how to verify a company’s claim that they’re green, and that number had declined compared to 2008,” notes O’Donnell. “Improved transparency by companies about their environmental behavior has been effective in helping consumers understand and feel more confident about green claims.”

THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATION

Anytime a business makes a claim about its service profile, it’s up to the individual consumer to believe it or not. We’ve all seen and read claims by companies that claim to be the “fastest,” “most experienced” and “most reliable.” For drycleaners that promote their “greenness,” third-party certification by an established drycleaning organization can give consumers confidence that a service is indeed green.

One example is the Green Cleaners Council, an environmental certification program developed a few years ago by the National Cleaners Association.

Five panel members collectively judge each applicant on recycling programs; investments in technology, goods or services that exceed regulatory requirements; water and energy conservation; and more. A maximum rating of five “leaves” can be earned, but that is extremely rare.

“I think the reason we came up with this is that so many people focus on the solvent,” says Ann Hargrove, NCA’s director of special projects and a member of the Council. “They don’t look at all the other things that the cleaner is doing to be environmentally conscious.

“We’re interested in the solvents you use, but we’re interested in what specific practices you’re using, what initiatives you’ve put in place. ... We’re looking from the front of the store to the back of the store.”

To earn additional points, one cleaner invested thousands of dollars in equipment and training for an entire wetcleaning department. Another switched their promotional printing to recycled paper and nontoxic inks.

“I can’t tell you how many people have purchased wetcleaning equipment, have changed their lights, have done all kinds of things,” she says. “This is like a roadmap to how to be greener.”

Certified cleaners are realizing the benefits of their participation, as indicated by their 99% renewal rate.

Frequently, when a drycleaner in the program installs new equipment or implements a new energy-saving procedure, they are anxious to be recertified, Hargrove says.

“This has brought cleaners to do some thinking about their plants, and that’s the whole point.”

Ian Murphy contributed to this story.

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