



Buying Environmentally Preferable Janitorial Products

Purchasing of environmentally preferable (EP) products inevitably involves a process of behavior change. End users such as mechanics, custodians, and office staff have been using traditional products for many years, and are often satisfied with their results. When environmental managers suggest a switch to EP products, they are usually met with resistance simply because any change is difficult, and it is human nature to resist change. Yet behaviors can be changed, and attitudes towards new products and systems improved. Behavior change involves much more than just issuing a carefully-worded policy statement or telling janitors to switch product “A” for product “B”.

A careful review of EP purchasing efforts across the country reveals a common approach in programs that have successfully changed purchasing behaviors. Listed below are the four common elements in these programs:

Management Support

Purchasing Agents

Environmental Staff

Training of End Users

We call this the “Sandwich Approach” to environmental purchasing. All elements must be in place or the “sandwich” will fall apart.

Obtain Management Support

Support from decision-level management is important if the program is to be successful. For small pilot projects, support from the facility manager of a single building may be adequate. For larger programs support from city administrators or elected officials may be required. Support at this level is imperative if busy managers and staff are to give sufficient time to implement the change.

Train End Users

No matter how well worded the policy or how effective the product, if the people implementing the change do not believe in the program, all efforts are doomed to fail. Attitudes like “if it doesn’t smell like bleach it won’t clean” or “if its got Environmental on the label it must be weak, and will result in more effort on my part to get the job done” must be addressed head on. These attitudes can also result in overuse of product, a practice which is potentially harmful to the user and is not good for the environment.

End users must be trained by a credible source, not by the environmental staff at their agency, who probably have never cleaned a public restroom. In addition, including these end-users early on in product selection and testing will turn skeptics into stake-holders. End users often become the best trainers, and should be used as models of success when approaching new departments.

Involve Purchasing Agents

In all large institutions, purchasing is done according to a complex and detailed set of regulations and policies. Bid processes are accountable to public scrutiny, and budgets are carefully guarded by elected officials and civil servants. Purchasing agents are skilled in locating almost any commodity, and are well trained in the evaluation of lowest cost bids.

Purchasing agents are usually not trained to develop environmental criteria or to read a material safety data sheet to evaluate the human health impacts of various product ingredients. However, these agents are critical to the success of any institutional purchasing program. They assure that the bid process goes smoothly, and can help with the enforcement of EP purchasing policies by rejecting requests for products that do not have the required approval of an environmental office.

Involve Environmental Staff

One of the most challenging and time-consuming aspects of EP Purchasing is defining what is meant by Environmentally Preferable. Unfortunately no universal definition exists for any product category, and each locality may find it has a unique set of priorities regarding human health and environmental protection. The environmental staff must provide the technical expertise and work with end users to determine product specifications. Purchasing agents and end-users do not have the time to develop technical specifications, and such details are rarely spelled out in the policy issued by top management. The environmental staff must become the accountable member of the team whose job it is to facilitate all elements of the “sandwich”.

Set Up The Purchasing System

Once the “sandwich” is set in place, the purchasing process is ready to begin. There are five key steps in this process of procuring EP products and services:

- Step 1: Establish Desired Goals
- Step 2: Design an Effective Bid Process
- Step 3: Review and Score Vendor Responses
- Step 4: Test Product Effectiveness
- Step 5: Award Purchase Order(s)

Adopted from a forthcoming article in [Pollution Prevention Review](#) by Thomas Barron, Debbie Raphael, and Lara Sutherland.