

Justifying investment in green initiatives

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By Sepp Gmeiner

There is almost no aspect of society that is not promoting green. It seems as if, overnight, even the biggest polluters are now greenwashed. They are model citizens and have flowers spewing out of their chimneys. Consumers are certainly confused over what is real and what is just hype. Consumers certainly want greener products. However, surveys show that only a small percentage of them are willing to voluntarily pay more for green.

If left to market forces alone, it would take a long time to reach the tipping point: the moment when the green movement becomes mainstream. Government regulations at the international, national or provincial/state level, such as the Kyoto Protocol or CARB in California, push awareness and development forward significantly. Once you start to look into green for your company, you are bombarded with acronyms and organizations assuring you of much greener performance. For example:

- ISO 14001 certification is a system of reviewing raw material, processes and disposal for sound environmental practices. This system is used in Europe more than North America.
- Green Cross Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) is an independent, third-party, certification organization for all products with good representation in the office furniture sector. Certified companies and products can carry its Green Cross seal.
- The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certifies that your company uses wood from managed resources.
- The California Air Resource Board (CARB) impacts furniture made and sold in California. On January 1, 2009, Phase I of the regulation goes into effect. It regulates the formaldehyde emission of particleboard, MDF and plywood. In Phase I, the levels are 0.18 ppm for particleboard and 0.24 for MDF. In comparison, the European standard, E1, is already at 0.14 ppm. Board suppliers like Tafisa, Uniboard or Flakeboard all produce board that is compliant with this standard.
- The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) system is created for the building and construction industries. It is an elaborate system of ratings and points. Higher points may achieve higher lease values, grants, tax benefits and prestige. As a system based on building, it is still applicable for our woodworking industry. Makers of kitchen cabinets, bathrooms, closets, architectural millwork and hotel furniture were the first ones that had to deal with these rules.
- Green Globe is another of the many green building rating systems. Green Globe and LEED are the most commonly used rating systems. Green Globe originated in the same manner as LEED, in the Building Establishment's Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM).
- To quote from the Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturer's Association (KCMA) website: "The Environmental Stewardship Program (ESP) helps compliant companies to demonstrate their commitment to environmental sustainability and to help consumers easily identify environmentally friendly products."
- Greenguard is an industry-independent, third-party, testing program for low-emitting products and material. This program is applied mainly in the office, commercial millwork and store fixture sectors.



To be Greenguard-certified for indoor air quality, a sample product is measured for VOC levels by independent labs. Greenguard compliance usually satisfies the LEED indoor air quality requirements.

As stated above, there are many programs out there. Normally, companies do not select a program on their own. More often, they are challenged by customer demands. For instance, "This building requires LEED points from its kitchen cabinets!" When the request for quotation for such a project is received, it is usually too late to get everything together to meet the deadline. However, after a missed opportunity, the decision is normally made to be ready for the next one.

If a company wants to become more environmentally responsible, there are a few good starting points. An excellent starting point is the finishing department. Traditional lacquers, varnishes and solvent-based stains are probably the biggest pollutants. The desired surface systems are water-based stains, UV-curable sealer and top coats. The quality of the new systems has come a long way and can match the old system in appearance. With this leading-edge technology, compliance with Greenguard is normally possible, as well as with LEED. The majority of the building-related programs are interested mainly in the off-gassing of the final product in the final building and, unfortunately, not as concerned about pollution during the manufacturing process.

A common situation with implementing modern-day finishing systems is that it sort of forces you toward automated spraying and curing. Often, the current spray equipment needs to be replaced or upgraded; manual spray booths for main production are becoming obsolete.

The lacquer material for green compliance is usually more expensive, and the equipment requires significant capital, yet the product you produce may or may not command a higher price. We have a challenge to find the financial justification for such a project. Justification needs to come from such productivity increases as switching from hand spraying to automatic finishing, or from incrementally more business from requests for green products.

The whole process of greening is too involved to do it justice in one article. I find it important and relevant for the challenges we are facing these days to continue to write about this subject. In the next issue, we will discuss in more detail which LEED points the kitchen cabinet manufacturer can supply to a building project.

In conclusion, I think we all are aware of the fact that all our products and processes have to be more environmentally neutral or friendly. How do we justify, in such difficult times, the investment? We know what we need to address, so the question remains when do we proceed and how quickly can we do it?

Out of my experience — not too long ago — when companies were all busy we did not work on it because we were too busy! There is never the perfect time. We need to make time and we need to get started, at least with the strategy.