



Green Cleaning: The Business Case

By: Bob Clarke, Senior Vice President, Sales and Marketing, OneSource

Green cleaning sounds like a great idea in terms of social consciousness. It's also proven to create a healthier indoor environment for people in the building. But what about the math? How do the short- and long-term costs of a green cleaning program stack up to the hard and soft savings?

The quick answer is this: The more you can invest now in a green cleaning program, the more it will pay off in the future. However, that doesn't mean those with low budgets should shy away from going green today. Even taking small steps will help you reap some immediate benefits. This article summarizes the small steps and the larger ones, so that you can wisely make a business case for an appropriate green cleaning program at your facility.

The Green Cleaning Continuum: How Green Can You Go?

For ease of this discussion, let's look at three levels of green cleaning that range from cost-neutral to high cost/high benefit. Depending on your budget and goals, you could choose one of these levels or something in between. (Hint: find a professional green cleaning company that will customize your program).

Level 1: Switch to environmentally friendly cleaning and paper products. This requires little or no additional spending, but plays an important role in creating a healthier indoor environment and protecting the earth.

- Ask your cleaning company to use third-party certified (e.g., Green Seal) or other "green" chemicals that work effectively, are gentle to people and the environment, and cost about the same as their traditional counterparts.
- Tissue and other janitorial paper products should meet Environmental Protection Agency or Green Seal standards for recycled content and manufacturing processes that do not use chlorine or its derivatives. In addition, dispensing paper products from large rolls (instead of small rolls or folded stacks) minimizes packaging and waste.

Level 2: Implement green cleaning processes and preventative measures in addition to the Level 1 options. Here, you will need to invest in some earth-friendly tools and equipment for your cleaning company to use. This investment usually pays for itself rather quickly.

Examples of "green" gear and procedures include:

- Microfiber dusting cloths and mops that efficiently capture and remove dirt instead of moving it around. This saves time and minimizes the use of cleaning chemicals.
- Green Label certified high performance vacuum cleaners that have a significant impact on improved indoor air quality. They effectively remove and contain soil while extending the carpet's life.
- Specialized matting systems at building entryways to capture dirt before it spreads through the building. This simple solution can save a lot of money, when you consider that most dirt in buildings is brought in from the outside on people's feet and the estimated cost of removing a single pound of dirt from an office building can exceed \$500.¹
- Proper mixing and dilution procedures ensure optimal cleaning product use. Chemicals should be as gentle as possible, yet yield expected results. This requires effective training and supervision of janitorial personnel.
- Early notification of spills means clean-up won't require drastic measures. Make sure building occupants understand the importance of reporting accidents. Implement a simple reporting procedure.
- Ask your janitorial company to follow strict cross-contamination protocol aimed at keeping building occupants healthier and minimizing the need for harsh cleaning. For example, restroom cleaning equipment shouldn't be used in eating areas.

Level 3: Integrate green cleaning holistically. This entails looking at your entire operation and your building systems in order to find all opportunities for “going green.” In addition to the Level 1 and 2 options, you would consider steps like the following (some options obviously cost more than others):

- Adopt formal low-environmental-impact policies for pest management, landscaping, ice and snow removal, lighting and HVAC systems, etc.
- Implement waste stream management and recycling programs.
- Install touchless restroom equipment.
- Isolate and properly vent janitorial closets.
- Follow a communication plan to regularly communicate to building occupants. If they appreciate and understand their roles in your green effort, it will be more successful.
- Measure and track your progress against baseline data. Regular, detailed quality control reporting can help catch small problems before they become overwhelming.
- Think outside the box when it comes to janitorial specifications. For example, you might consider day cleaning, because keeping lights out at night saves energy costs.

¹ International Sanitary Supply Association

- Implement measures necessary to become LEED certified. This program by the U.S. Green Building Council entails more than green cleaning (which helps you gain points toward certification) and yields even more benefits. See www.usgbc.org for more information.

The Hard and Soft of It

Now that green programs have gained in popularity, studies have proven their many advantages. Depending on the extent of the program, hard-dollar gains and savings can include:

- Reductions in operating costs, especially waste disposal, water and energy
- Rebates (e.g., from gas companies) and government incentives
- Optimized life-cycle economic performance
- Improved building occupancy rates

Green cleaning can also play a role in reducing liability. Even something as simple as installing new matting systems (mentioned in Level 2 above) minimizes the potential for slips caused by wet floors. According to Wausau Insurance Company, 30% of worker injuries are slip-related, and the average cost of each injury exceeds \$12,000.²

Another business case justification for going green is increased asset value. Appropriate, gentler cleaning and preventative maintenance keeps assets newer longer. And holistic green programs go way beyond that advantage. For example, because of the proven benefits of green buildings, some experts believe that green mortgage-backed securities (MBS) will soon be developed. According to the Institute for Market Transformation to Sustainability, “A green MBS would package mortgages on buildings that meet specific energy-use and environmental benchmarks.... [and] should be rated higher and worth more. The result: better and cheaper access to capital for borrowers and owners who want to invest in green buildings.... Appropriately valuing green buildings could provide a cheaper cost of capital, higher appraised value and higher credit ratings.”³

Companies have also achieved well-documented soft savings through employee productivity gains, improved morale, reduced absenteeism, lower health costs (insurance and sick leave), and the reduction of other costs associated with sick-building syndrome.

Though “soft,” these savings can amount to big dollars, as evidenced by the following.

- At PNC Firstside Center in Pittsburgh, employee turnover decreased by 26% after moving into their new green facility, compared to a decrease of only 11% for a similar business unit in a non-green building.⁴
- Productivity gains can translate into an estimated savings of \$0.58 per square foot.⁵

² www.stopdirt.com

³ *Building Operating Management* magazine, December 2005

⁴ Green Building Alliance in its third annual *Shades of Green* report

⁵ William Fisk, *Health and Productivity Gains from Better Indoor Environments*

- Potentially, \$17-48 billion in savings nationally can be realized through straightforward improvements to indoor environments.⁶

In addition, marketing and recruiting advantages come from being recognized as a socially responsible organization – something even more important to the next generation of consumers and workers than it was to baby-boomers. According to George Denise of Cushman & Wakefield, “For a publicly-traded company, social and environmental responsibility ratings by independent agencies can mean millions of dollars in value when you consider that thousands of investors and even entire mutual funds reference those ratings in choosing which companies to invest in.” He adds that, for one of his green clients, such ratings are also “extremely valuable in terms of attracting the best talent coming out of college each year.”

Above and beyond these economic gains, consider the global benefits of reducing natural resource consumption, as well as air and water pollution. It’s difficult to place a value on such far-reaching effects, but it’s also hard to deny the importance of taking action now.

So, is green cleaning an undisputable business necessity? That depends on your industry, your budget and your social philosophy. A janitorial company specializing in green cleaning can help you answer the question by evaluating your needs and your potential savings. The green cleaning continuum runs from the simple implementation of Level 1 options – which yield mostly soft savings – through holistic program choices that can net millions of dollars in savings every year. The only wrong answer is deciding not to embrace green cleaning today.

About the Author

Bob Clarke brings more than 18 years of experience in the facilities services industry to his role of Senior Vice President, Sales and Marketing for OneSource. In this role, he oversees the company’s sales and marketing direction and growth, and manages a team of sales and marketing professionals who account for more than \$100 million in annual revenue.

An active member of International Downtown Association (IDA) for nearly 10 years, Mr. Clarke currently serves on the board of directors, and also participates in various conferences and events with the organization. Mr. Clarke received a Bachelor of Criminal Justice from West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

⁶ Green Building Alliance in its third annual *Shades of Green* report