

Dimming the Red Lights on Green

By Mike Sawchuk

The growing enthusiasm of North American consumers for all things clean and Green is being overshadowed by their economic fears and, more directly, their concern about paying the mortgage and putting food on the table, according to an article distributed by the news service Reuters.

From hybrid cars to solar panels, says the article, products that promise to reduce consumption of polluting fossil fuels are not selling as quickly as they did before the worldwide economy took a tailspin.

This is actually quite a reversal of fortune. Just a few months ago, for example, certain hybrid cars, cost \$3,000 to \$5,000 more than conventional automobiles—and there was a waiting list to purchase them. Now the waiting is evaporating and consumers are putting more thought into the idea of paying more for a product just because it is environmentally responsible.

There are several factors at play here, but one key issue has resurfaced in recent months: the belief that Green

technologies and products cost more than their conventional counterparts. Even if the return on the investment is clear, sometimes the initial extra expense for a Green product is hard for consumers to swallow. However, while these concerns may be justified when it comes to solar panels, Green roofs and new heating and air-conditioning systems, it is definitely not true of environmentally preferable cleaning products, which generally have a competitive cost point.

Unfortunately, some distributors are now being forced to re-educate their customers about the value — and cost neutrality — of Green cleaning products. This should not be surprising considering the economic turmoil of the past few months; distributors should simply treat these circumstances as a new hurdle in a changing business climate.

The best way to meet this challenge is to provide customers with cost comparisons, at end-use/user dilutions, **for the complete bundle of products. Some may be a bit more expensive, others less.** In most cases, the price difference is negligible if it exists at all.

As to equipment, many experts agree that vacuum cleaners and carpet extractors approved by the Carpet and Rug

Institute, as an example, are better quality machines. They last longer and have fewer maintenance needs and less downtime, which is a cost savings in the long run.

There are also intangible benefits of using Green cleaning products. Several studies have indicated that Green products help create an indoor environment that leads to enhanced worker productivity, less illness and absenteeism, and improved student performance. These benefits all have a financial component—when worker productivity goes up, absenteeism goes down and student performance improves, there is a cost savings attached.

When distributors encounter red lights when selling Green, they should be prepared to address the situation head on. Educate customers on the idea that while a Green roof or other Green innovations may be costly and have a slow return on investment, Green cleaning chemicals have little or no added costs and actually pay dividends from the start.