



How Green is Your Clean?

Avoid Green Washing by Aligning Résumé with Reality

By George R. Lohnes

It is the nature of marketing (at least, good marketing) to be at the forefront of new products and services and to “push the envelope” in terms of performance and value. This is true of traditional products and services and equally true in the area of greening and sustainability.

When companies’ claims get too far ahead of their competencies, when what they are saying is significantly different from what they are doing, when their operational capabilities are far outstripped by their value statements, then it creates what is traditionally referred to as a “credibility gap.”

This is what happened with the sustainability movement—the industry began to change at a conceptual level but, for the most part, it was not dramatically changing its on-the-ground operations. In the sustainability arena, this credibility gap is quickly becoming known by the clever euphemism “green washing.”

This is a natural consequence of the fact that, over the years, custodial operations had experienced evolutionary improvements, but had not fundamentally changed since the invention of the mop—okay, the invention of the vacuum cleaner. Operating procedures were often entrenched and the status quo was acceptable. As a result, many Business Service Contractors (BSCs) responded to the change in commercial properties’ role in sustainability by churning out some green marketing materials. This created a résumé-to-reality gap.

Often, the next step was to start using sustainably certified chemicals and gradually replace worn out equipment with more up-to-date vacs, scrubbers, etc. While these upgrades were very important and incrementally helpful, often that was as far as BSCs took it. The fundamental changes required to transform the industry hadn’t taken root. The gap remained.

About the same time, commercial building owners and managers took a mirrored stance. Many of the early adopters embraced and changed their go-to-market strategies from the ground up. Others, however, simply added sustainability check-offs to their RFPs and, for many, that’s as far as they went. There was also a gap between their requirements and reality.

The result was that virtually every BSC, even those with minimal sustainability practices, was able to legitimately respond to most standard RFP questions regarding green.

Sustainability Takes Hold

Enlightened BSCs and building owners/managers moved onto the next stage when they realized that sustainable practices are



not only good for the environment but also cost effective and a positive differentiator in the market that can deliver hard dollar returns. Although the dream of increased margins for sustainable practices was quickly dashed, the ability to deliver truly sustainable practices, virtually cost neutral, was well within BSCs’ grasps. The value equation was fundamentally altered.

These BSCs invested in the supervisory and staff training necessary to properly use the new cleaning solutions and equipment. They updated their cleaning and maintenance standard operating procedures (SOPs) to ensure that daily operations supported sustainability, and they researched and evaluated new technologies in order to stay ahead of the trends. They also became knowledgeable about the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED® programs and other organizations at the forefront. In other words, they went beyond the letter of the law to internalize sustainability and fundamentally change their corporate cultures.

Finding the Real Players

But the résumé-to-reality problem still remains. Virtually every BSC can say, “Yes” to green check-offs in RFPs. How do building owners and managers cut through the marketing and the minimal operational changes to identify service suppliers that have truly made the commitment? How do they identify the companies that can become partners with them in their quest for sustainability, energy efficiency and healthy environments for their buildings?

The answer lies in going beyond the RFP to truly understand the BSC’s commitment, investment and progress in adopting sustainability. There should be a script to follow—and there is. Even if you are not planning to pursue the LEED for Existing Buildings: Operations & Maintenance (LEED EBOM) certification, its guidelines and scorecards provide excellent outlines for vetting BSC proposals as it covers indoor environmental quality, including indoor air quality and green cleaning, energy, waste management and purchasing.

The following operational areas are worth exploring:

Standard Operating Procedures—Examine the SOPs. Any bidder should be able to produce its SOPs immediately. The SOPs should be specific to each of the green operations covered in the RFP—not an older generic version that has been updated to include green references. They should specify acceptable procedures for each process and be clear and reasonable in approach. For instance, do the SOPs fully address waste handling and disposal to ensure that materials are properly managed throughout the process? Does the BSC have separate procedures for cleaning and maintenance that address the differences between the operations?

Training—Inquire about the training regimen. It should include initial green (and safety) procedure training sessions and periodic refresher courses that are routinely scheduled and reported. Look at the infrastructure that supports training. It should take advantage of the BSC's chemical and equipment suppliers' training resources and also utilize in-house training staffs for company-specific training.

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Day-to-Day Management—Determine the commitment of the supervisory and management staffs. Examine their training. Are green metrics part of the management evaluation process?

Inspections—Is there a well-defined, frequent inspection process that returns a representative view of the quality of operations? Green metrics must be part of the inspection process in order to measure both the current state and progress against goals. In addition to quality and sustainability outcomes (cleanliness, IAQ, equipment performance, etc.), inspections should include the full life-cycle of products used. This means that chemical and equipment storage, usage, maintenance and disposal should be included in periodic inspection reports.

Reporting—Does the BSC have a reporting process that accurately presents results in a timely fashion? The reports for both the BSC's management and the building owner/operator should be easily available, generally through a Web interface. Reports should also be customizable for different levels of management and detailed for operational managers while offering executive overviews. As well, they should be interactive, allowing reviewers to drill down through the data and actionable, highlighting metrics that are out of norm.

Purchasing—If the BSC is purchasing supplies and equipment for the building owner/manager, there should be a solid purchasing and distribution process that clearly defines acceptable products and puts controls in place to minimize off-catalog purchases. The process should be easy to use, responsive and cost effective. If the building owner/management company will be making the purchases, the BSC should be able to provide the list of sustainable supplies and equipment and be able to work with the staff to facilitate purchasing.

These are the operational expectations. Outstanding BSCs will go beyond. Ask about:

Safety—Although not technically connected to sustainability, safety is critical. It says a lot about the company's work practices, training and day-to-day management, and should be closely monitored and reported. Whether in an industrial or a commercial setting, safety performance can be used to compare and rate service providers.

Innovation—Another cultural measure to look at is the company's approach to innovation. Does it actively seek better ways to deliver green services through new work practices and technologies? Does its purchasing staff actively engage its vendors to recommend new technologies? Does it test and participate in the development of new technologies? Companies that look for new ways of delivering services will more quickly bring cost-effective and efficient solutions to their customers.

Commitment to Sustainability—Chances are, once the RFP has been vetted to the level recommended here, building owners/managers will have a pretty good feel for the service provider's commitment. Leading companies are enthusiastic about their sustainability culture and interested in creating positive change. One tangible measure of commitment is LEED® AP (Accredited Professional) staff. A service provider's LEED AP staff can certainly be helpful for LEED accreditation, and they can also assist customers that are not pursuing certification by identifying, recommending and implementing new procedures that advance sustainability.

The field of qualified BSCs that can offer sustainable services is certainly larger than it was a few years ago. But it is still not as large as marketing materials may suggest. Once again, is this green washing? The answer remains: It might be. The challenge and the responsibility for building owners and managers who seek green services is to get beyond the résumé to examine the infrastructure and commitment of service providers. That is the way to build a successful, long-term relationship that achieves sustainability. ^{BOMA}

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