

What's This Sustainability Thing Really All About?

Stephen P. Ashkin, president, The Ashkin Group

The introduction of this new newsletter from KIMBERLY-CLARK PROFESSIONAL* specifically addressing sustainability issues provides a perfect opportunity for us to clarify some terms and help you better understand the language of sustainability. Many managers might think the word sustainable is relatively new, possibly one of the terms that have evolved with the environmental movement over the past 30 years.

Actually, the word sustainable dates back to the 18th century, when foresters in Europe first began taking steps to preserve and protect forests. At that time, wood was used for just about everything, from constructing homes and schools, to cooking meals, to fueling factories. The goal was to harvest trees only when there was enough new growth to replenish them.

It is from these "sustainable forests" that the concept of sustainability was born. The concept was further clarified in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, formerly the World Commission on Environment and Development, when it defined sustainability to mean using natural resources in such a way "that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Today, that definition has expanded considerably. In many ways, the words Green and Sustainable have become interchangeable, at least in the professional cleaning and building industries. It would be safe to define a sustainable facility as one that is designed, planned, constructed and operated to have a minimal impact on the environment and natural resources while simultaneously producing a healthier working, learning, or living environment for building occupants.

Well, it would be nice if we could end it there, thoroughly comfortable that we know what sustainability is all about. However, just as Green cleaning, environmental responsibility, and sustainability are an ongoing journey, the term has expanded once again. And this time it has become much broader and much more complex.

Enter the New Triple Bottom Line

Some financial gurus along with Wall Street reporters may still focus on one bottom line, referring to a company's profits or losses. However, in the environmental movement, there are actually three bottom lines, known, as you might expect, as the "triple bottom line," each equally important and necessary.

The phrase, which is considered an accounting term, was first coined in the mid-1990s by John Elkington, who has been referred to by Business Week magazine as "the dean of the corporate responsibility movement." In practical terms, he defined the triple bottom line as expanding the traditional accounting framework. No longer can a company consider just its financial performance; it must also account for its impact on the environment and protection of natural resources as well as its "social" performance. This social performance refers to

how a company treats the people who work for the firm along with the community and country in which it does business.

Thus, a Green and sustainable company is one that goes beyond Green. It includes the triple bottom line providing economic, society, and environmental benefits as described above.

Measurement Issues

This adds an entirely new dimension to the term sustainability. It also calls for ways companies and organizations can measure their sustainability. As to traditional financial performance, there are customary accounting systems in place that can accurately measure an organization's financial health.

Social performance, on the other hand, is a bit more involved. This requires that organizations seek to benefit many constituencies, most especially those who work for the company, by providing them with fair salaries, a safe work environment, fair work hours and benefits.

However, measuring an organization's sustainable impact on the environment and natural resources can become even more complicated. To address this challenge, computer and Web-based "dashboard" systems are now being introduced that help provide these measurements.

The way one such system works, developed initially for the professional cleaning industry, is unique in its sophistication, yet easy to use. Information such as energy use and oil and fuel consumption is entered into the Web-based system. The dashboard then allows users to do the following:

- Identify and benchmark how they are using these natural resources.
- Measure the impact of using these natural resources on the environment.
- Set realistic goals to help reduce use of natural resources.
- Uncover places to reduce operational costs.

Clarifying the Clarifications

It would not be accurate to say that in the past, corporations and organizations have focused solely on profits, with little concern about their impact on the environment, the people who work for them, or the communities they serve. It is undeniable, however, that as the concept of sustainability has evolved, we have all become much more conscious of how we may negatively impact the environment as well as how we can make improvements.

Further, we must not forget that in addition to protecting the environment and natural resources, one of the key goals of sustainability is cost savings. Why are Wal-Mart and scores of other organizations embracing sustainability with such fervor? Yes, I do believe they feel it is necessary and "the right thing to do," but even Wal-Mart CEO Mike Duke admits becoming more sustainable will help his company cut costs and keep prices down, a goal he shares with firms across the country and around the globe.

Stephen P. Ashkin is president of The Ashkin Group, a consulting firm specializing in greening the cleaning industry, as well as Sustainability Tool LLC,

*an electronic dashboard that allows jansan companies to measure, track and report on their facility's environmental impacts. He is also co-author of both *The Business of Green Cleaning* and *Green Cleaning for Dummies*.*

Ashkin has worked in the cleaning industry since 1981 and has held senior management positions in leading consumer and commercial product companies. He began his work on Green Cleaning in 1990 and today is thought of as the "father of Green Cleaning." For more information, visit www.AshkinGroup.com.