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Green Your Facility with an Environmentally Preferable Purchasing Program (EPP)

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Like businesses competing for customers, modern-day colleges and universities must go head-to-head in order to aggressively compete for students, according to Jay Kahn, director of facilities operations at Central Michigan University (CMU) in Mount Pleasant, Mich.

For that reason, CMU decided recently that it needed to implement a slew of fresh programs—green programs—that would appeal to a new generation of environmentally conscious young people. Among those programs were initiatives themed around recycling, dining, transportation and construction, including the erection of a new, [LEED-certified](#) Education Building that will debut this fall with a green roof, energy-efficient heating and cooling units, and renewable materials such as bamboo.

CMU didn't look only to new facilities, however. It turned to its existing facilities, as well, where Kahn and a staff of more than 100 custodians and supervisors implemented a series of green purchasing policies that Kahn says have enabled the university to reduce its costs, limit its carbon footprint and increase its profile among eco-savvy students.

"We took a look at all the products that we purchase, and we started with the top 10 items that we spend the most money on," Kahn says. "We made those green and I've found that that's helped us not only compete for students, but also reduce our overall operating costs."

What's Powerful About Green Purchasing?

Like CMU, facilities of all types can enjoy the strategic, environmental and financial benefits of a sustainable business by not only building new [green buildings](#), but also by purchasing green products for existing buildings. In fact, having a formal purchasing program in place can help maximize green incentives and green investments, according to Anca Novacovici, president of Eco-Coach, a Washington D.C.-based sustainable consultancy. Such programs, she says—called Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) programs—can help companies save money as well as increase employee output.

"Basically, what having an EPP program means is that you're providing guidelines for purchasing materials that do not harm the environment," Novacovici explains. "Even though some of those products may cost more up front, there can be a large payback over a period of time. Energy-efficient products, for one, can obviously help you lower your utility bills. And green products when used in construction can decrease 'sick building syndrome' and absenteeism."

In other words, green purchases don't just help the environment; they also help your employees and—because they'll be healthier and happier—your bottom line.

Defining 'Environmentally Preferable'

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), environmentally preferable products are "products or services that have a lesser or reduced effect on human health and the environment when compared with competing products or services that serve the same purpose."

In order to decide whether commonly used products within your facility are environmentally preferable, Novacovici recommends asking yourself the following basic questions before making a purchase:

- Where was the product made? A product's environmental benefits—bamboo, for instance—may be ruled moot if importing that bamboo from China requires shipping it 6,000 miles by fuel-consuming and emissions-producing ships, planes and trucks. For that reason, Novacovici suggests buying products that are made as close to your facility as possible, preferably within 500 miles.
- How is the material produced? Before purchasing a product, find out if it was produced in manufacturing plants that use a lot of chemicals or produce a lot of pollution, and if the plant's workers are treated well and paid properly.
- What is the product made of? When considering flooring, for example, there are vast distinctions between bamboo, cork, wood from a virgin forest and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified wood.
- Who makes the product? If a product is made by a large corporation rather than a small business, you'll want to find out what the corporation's environmental policies are, and what its purchasing standards are when buying from vendors and suppliers.
- How long will the product last? A product's lifecycle is an important consideration, according to Novacovici, as products that last longer have to be replaced less often, resulting in less waste in our country's landfills.
- How can one dispose of the product? Because all products eventually have to be replaced, consider their potential for recycling and reuse.

How to Build an EPP Program

Once they know the benefits of green products—and how to select and evaluate them—[facility managers](#) can begin establishing a formal EPP program.

To do exactly that, they should start by taking inventory of frequently purchased items, according to Michael Beutel, the resident green building expert for green Web site GoGreen Online and president of Avalon Builders Inc., a green building company in Sonoma, Calif.

"All facilities need certain things to keep their operations running," he says. "I recommend sitting down with everyone involved in purchasing decisions and figuring out what your usage is when it comes to materials you use every day. Make a list, then decide what items on that list would be the easiest and most economical to change."

Once you know what products you'd like to substitute, Beutel recommends asking existing suppliers if they have green alternatives. If you're worried that green products might cost extra, he points out, working with existing vendors may enable you to negotiate better prices.

“If you look at your historical audit to determine how much you need and how often,” he says, “you can buy things in bulk and end up saving a certain percentage.”

Finally, Kahn says, don’t just purchase. Publicize, as well—with statements on your Web site, for instance, and signs in your facility. “If you’re purchasing green products,” he says, “tell people about it.”