



Bridging the green gap

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Feature

Experts discuss the hot topic of sustainability in water treatment.

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The water treatment industry is in the midst of a transition when it comes to incorporating green into their clients' homes and facilities.

The days of green as a "nice novelty" are nearing the end: Soon, these enviro-friendly products and equipment lines will be the standard, and not among the exclusive.

We reached out to a few experts in the field to discuss the state of green and how our readers — including dealers and suppliers — can continue to bridge the gap of green awareness to end use customers and homeowners.

Why green? Why now?

As each day passes, more customers are demanding these features and the reasons are plenty.

"Today's consumers are intelligent and educated," remarks Mark Lambert, managing partner for Water Industry Solutions, LLC. "They are changing their behaviors to be able to adopt best practices. The behavioral changes are going to drive people to [implement] different, more efficient technologies."

The behavioral changes currently occurring at the end user level include: Smarter water use in domestic applications, including landscaping; recycling and reusing water; installing water saving and energy efficient fixtures; and being more cognizant of what's in our water sources and supplies.

However, warns Eran Fischer of Forsta Filters Inc., progress in some areas remains slow regarding the green benefits our industry offers, but showing cost savings is key.

"There is still a long way to go when it comes to informing consumers of the necessity of water treatment solutions," notes Fischer. "Fortunately, cost conscious businesses are realizing that incorporating long lasting water treatment solutions actually saves time, money and resources."

Overcoming challenges

Some professionals argue that this industry has been providing green services and supplies naturally for many years.

Still, according to Tom Cartwright, CEO of PureOFlow, the water treatment industry and end users have room for improvement.

These include:

- The addition of salt (typically in the form of sodium or potassium chloride), added to our water

supplies from conventional water softening

- The popularity and convenience of bottled water
- The lack of standards for water treatment technologies that are not water softening, carbon/sediment filtration or sequestering filters
- Making a concerted effort to promote alternative water treatment technologies, while making certain those technologies carry quantifiable third-party verification.

“And, primarily, education,” adds Cartwright. “Our industry, in the residential and light commercial sectors, for years has been dominated [by] water softening and standard water filtration technologies and manufacturers. In order to promote truly green methods of water treatment as an industry, we need to present better, greener equipment [and] educate and promote these technologies or systems to the public.”

Awareness and conservation are two areas that are integral to being green.

Water shortages and concerns are casually noticed by most today, especially in many parts of the United States, however these issues will be hard to ignore as we look ahead to 2030, for example.

Many industry professionals are doing just that and commenting that water could be the world’s next oil.

Recently, a report by The 2030 Water Resources Group titled, “Charting our water future: Economic frameworks to inform decision-making,” offers sobering information about our future.

The group, which was formed in 2008 to contribute new insights to the increasingly critical issue of water resource scarcity, consists of several organizations, including: The International Finance Corporation (IFC); McKinsey & Company; and an extended business consortium.

One eye-opening forecast from the report, which can be downloaded at www.mckinsey.com, is that there will be a projected 40 percent gap in the demand for water versus supply in 2030.

Moving forward, being green will include closing this gap and focusing on better utilization of existing water sources.

Green is king

Most customers consider costs, as mentioned, to be a deciding factor when shopping for water treatment solutions.

“Cost drives so many decisions, and is a practical consideration of course,” notes Fischer. “But cost is precisely the reason why green technology is so important. Not only is green equipment important for equipment protection and waste reduction, but without it environmental cost becomes uncontrollable.”

Residential customers may be swayed by energy and utility savings associated with going green.

Aside from changing water use behaviors in the home, there is another resource available that can help spot inefficiencies.

“A good water audit may uncover many water saving opportunities and could reduce total water

utilization by as much as 25-30 percent," says Lambert.

When selling to commercial accounts, additional aspects of green benefits are available.

Besides cost savings, commercial facilities that adopt green energy and water features can pursue LEED certification and, in some locations, tax credits as well.

Walk the walk

The reasons behind the need for sustainable practices, particularly in the area of water usage and treatment, are many.

Industry veterans, like Lambert, never viewed green and conservation as a movement or industry fad.

"Water treatment professionals have always been looking for opportunities to improve energy efficiency and the water footprint from a utilization perspective," says Lambert.

Still, others notice opportunities for our industry.

The use of water softeners has been put under a microscope, most recently as a result of last year's California Assembly Bill 1366 (AB 1366), which makes it easier for regional agencies to impose local bans or restrictions on water softeners.

Disposal and use of plastic, adds Cartwright, is another area in need of improvement.

"The industry has, in general, promoted those products produced by the largest manufacturers in our industry — and those are traditionally water softeners and carbon filtration. While we have done an admirable job establishing standards for these technologies, we have not effectively developed or promoted many of the technologies that do not add salt to our water supplies or add extensive plastic to our landfills," asserts Cartwright.

Leading by example and effective communication are also ways your business can promote green expertise.

To set an example, Fischer says, water treatment professionals have the responsibility to examine their own practices and minimize or eliminate waste.

Often, after manufacturers, suppliers and dealers evaluate their operations closely, a reduction of costs can be achieved by improved manufacturing practices or production capabilities.

"[Those savings] can be passed along to the customer," adds Fischer. "Better efficiency, less waste and extended life-cycle are the benefits of green water treatment, and the gap in initial cost is closing."

Educating the end user is also your responsibility and in your best interest since knowledgeable customers will already know the benefits associated with your green message and be early adopters to the innovative products and systems that hit the market.

"In this information-driven market, consumers want to know the 'facts and the impacts' before making decisions. The water treatment dealer is in the best position to provide the education," concludes Lambert.