

Nine Practical, Old-School Steps to Go Green

Skip the hemp drapes and recycled wine-cork flooring.

Your pro customers have traditionally looked to you for expert recommendations and advice on building materials, and now they want that expertise for *all things green*. A contractor may have a client who says, “I want a green home,” yet neither of them may have the foggiest notion of what that means at the level of product/material choices and design decisions. The result: a daunting task for them in your store aisles, staring at a gallery of third-party green ratings and manufacturers’ claims.

Well, one way to help that customer may lie in the staff training offered by Ritz-Carlton Hotels.

The Ritz-Carlton?

Yes. When the Ritz-Carlton Hotels trains new staffers, they don’t run them through long lists of specific actions. Instead they teach a *principle*—“We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen,”—and any action that’s in accordance with that principle is the right path for the Ritz.

How does this apply to green building?

Well, keep a few *green* principles in mind, adhere to those principles when suggesting products, and you’re probably on the right green path.

My green principles are universal: *Use less energy; use less water; don’t poison the air anywhere; avoid buying things that poison the world when they are made or shipped; buy from responsible manufacturers.*

That said, you do need some baseline knowledge and an overview of third-party labels. Here is a quick nine-point primer to help you along. You can also visit www.GreenWizard.com or www.GreenBuildingAdvisor.com for great

resources and guidance. (Full disclosure, both companies are/have been my clients.)

1) Offer lumber products (especially including cabinets and flooring) that are either formaldehyde-free, ultra-low-emitting Formaldehyde (ULEF), no-added formaldehyde (NAF), or no added urea formaldehyde (NAUF). Formaldehyde is a known carcinogen, but it’s even common these days to find hardwood plywood and even OSB that doesn’t contain it.

2) Offer formaldehyde-free insulation batts. Most major lines have formaldehyde-free products, and they are often third-party certified.

3) For spot application spray foams, use foams that are isocyanate-free, formaldehyde-free, and have low- or no-VOCs. (They are all HCFC-free now.)

4) White roofs drive down cooling costs, but homeowners don’t like them. Now, with new granule technology, even grey shingles can reflect 20% of solar energy. Offer Energy Star-rated products, and sell radiant barriers as a companion product.

5) Offer certified lumber. It’s frankly very hard to find lumber in North America that isn’t certified with programs like SFI, FSC, American Tree Farm, or CSA. But avoid non-plantation-grown tropicals.

6) Offer zero-VOC, or low-VOC paints, finishes, sealants, caulks, and adhesives. Low-cost, durable, “green” products are widely available. The EPA sets compliance standards. NAHB’s National Green

Building Standard and LEED both require VOC-compliant products.

7) For plastic deck and trim, look for products that are recyclable, that are certified for recycled content (check GreenSeal), and that are made by companies committed to recycling programs.

8) Urge your customers not to scrimp on the thermal envelope (house wrap, insulation, foams). The greenest thing a contractor can build is one that burns as little fuel as possible over its lifetime. After all the VOCs have flashed off, and the forests have grown back, the house will be around for decades, even centuries, burning fuel each year of its life.

9) Avoid exotic products; instead, focus on sound building practices. Green building is about using *greener versions* of traditional building products. Don’t be lured away by crazy inventions that claim to be green. ■



The award-winning author of many books and articles about construction, and a frequent contributor to the industry’s leading trade magazines, **John D. Wagner** can be contacted at www.JohnDWagner.com.