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Green Building (Part 2): Selecting Sustainable Materials

Help your customers reduce their carbon footprints with earth-friendly building materials.

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When it comes to sustainable building, many of your customers might not necessarily be ready for a full-scale green-building project, but they might be open to incorporating some earth-friendly elements, such as paint with low volatile organic compound (VOC) content and wood treated with non-toxic preservatives.

"The green and sustainable realities often happen in an add-on fashion," says Randy Hischemellor, a Philadelphia-based green remodeling contractor. "You have a house that is what it is, and when you remodel, you'll add some green elements, such as more natural appliances, a composter and a rain barrel."

For Hischemellor, sustainable building is about the health of his clients, as well as his own health as a builder. He makes it a point to use green building materials and products whenever possible. "The best way to educate and sell green is to operate from a place of concern for people's well-being," he says.

Help your customers reduce the impact of their projects on the environment by recommending and using eco-friendly, non-toxic supplies and fixtures. Here are a few ideas to get started:

Building Materials

- **Buy lumber that is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.** FSC-certified wood ensures that the wood comes from a managed forest and the company manufacturing the wood practices environmentally responsible forestry.
- **Choose lumber that is treated with alkaline copper quaternary (ACQ)** not chromated copper arsenate (CCA), a preservative used to treat wood and protect it from being destroyed by insects, fungus or exposure to UV light. CCA contains arsenic, a known human carcinogen. Hischemellor recommends using non-arsenic, ACQ-lumber treated with copper.
- **Use other less-toxic, less-polluting alternatives.** The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation recommends plastic lumber made out of recycled plastic, composite lumber made of combined wood fibers and plastic, or naturally decay-resistant wood, such as cedar and redwood which contain natural wood preservatives.

Paints, Solvents and Sealants

- **Choose products with low VOC.** VOCs, a common ground contaminant and air pollutant, are harmful to human health and used to produce and manufacture paints and refrigerants. Look for sealants, adhesives, paints and coatings with low VOC, says Tom Tedrow, LEED AP, vice president of design and construction services at ICF CAE, a Norcross, Ga.-based commercial design-build firm that is currently engaged with several financial institutions on sustainable projects.
- **Go solvent-free, if possible.** "It's especially important for contractors working on a nursery, nursing home or school to consider using organic or solvent-free paints, which don't contain any harmful chemicals," Hischemellor says. "The lower the VOC content the better, and zero is optimal."

Energy-saving Fixtures and Appliances

- **Select low-flow plumbing fixtures.** Using water-conserving fixtures, such as low-flow toilets, urinal aerators and spray valves, can dramatically lower the water consumption in both commercial and residential buildings. “In addition to saving water and energy, the owner will incur significant savings in hot water heating water and cutting down on energy it takes to pump water and treat sewage,” says Terry Janssen, CEO of Lowe’s Water Conservation, a St. Pete Beach, Fla. manufacturer that makes low-flow products that can save from 60 to 110 percent more than other low-flow products on the market.
- **Use low-energy consumption light fixtures, lamps and appliances.** In lieu of energy consuming incandescent halogen light bulbs, install fluorescents and LEDs. Consider replacing older fixtures with new ENERGY STAR fixtures, which use about two-thirds less electricity than standard fixtures to provide equal light, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Hirschmiller recommends ENERGY STAR appliances, such as dishwashers, dryers, and refrigerators.
- **Apply solar window film.** Window film is made of a polyester film coated with UV-absorbing adhesive. Using a clear window film retrofitted to the inside surface of glass can help your customers control climate and save energy in lighting and cooling costs. “In Arizona or California, you may run air conditioning 250 days a year, but in a building using solar window film, you may need to run it only 180 days,” says Lisa Smith, product marketing manager for Bekaert Specialty Films, a San Diego, Calif. manufacturer of solar control and security window films. “In addition to helping regulate the temperature, window films reduce glare and protect interior furnishings from sunlight,” she says.

Next month, learn more about energy-saving techniques and tips in the last installment of this green building series.

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