

Eight Ways to Go Green at No or Low Cost

Most dealers already stock green products, and adding new green lines is easier than you think.

By John Wagner

If you read the trade press or even your local newspaper, the only area where the housing marketing is seeing sustained growth is in green and sustainable building practices. A recent McGraw survey states that half the nation's new homes will be green by 2010 and that 85% of green home buyers said they were more satisfied with their new green homes than with their previous, traditionally built homes. Of the homeowners surveyed, 40% used green building practices when remodeling.

Even in a down housing market, there will likely be more than 1.4 million homes built each year, and half of those homes—700,000 homes each year!—will be green within three years. Ignore this market at your own peril.

The vast majority of these homes are going green through tighter building envelopes (which lower heating and cooling costs), and through efficient Energy Star appliances, low-demand lighting, and low-flow plumbing fixtures. But even with widely available green building standards in the public domain (download NAHB's for free at Nahb.org/gbg), and the rivers of ink flowing in the trade press about green building practices, there remains an impression among professionals still watching from the sidelines that green building is an exotic practice that demands hard-to-source or rare building products.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, there are milk-based and citrus-based paints, exotic recycled barn-door flooring, and whey-based polyurethanes. But most contractors can go green by using many items already available in today's lumberyards, with a little direction from your sales staff. Dealers can highlight the green features of the products they already carry, and bring in some new product lines to green-up their shelves and bays with little effort. Here are eight ways to go green at little or no extra cost:

1) Offer Low-VOC Paints

Low-odor, zero-VOC, or low-VOC paints reduce the fumes in the air, cut down on smog, and expose workers to fewer toxins. They are a healthy, good choice all

the way around. The EPA has already set the standard for paints: 5-250 grams of VOC per liter for "low-VOC" and <5 grams for "zero-VOC."

Many national brands now have low- or no-VOC lines, and the EPA label reference is the gold standard. For stricter green standards, look for Green Seal or Master Painters Institute (MPI) ratings. It's an easy stock and an easy sell. Highlight it with a "Green Choice" aisle sign.

2) Offer Low-VOC Caulks and Sealants

As with paints, caulks and adhesives are now coming out in no- and low-VOC lines. The performance is comparable to traditional caulks and sealants, and you can likely get a premium price for these. Royal Adhesives and Sealants, DAP, OSI Green Series (Henkel), and Titebond are among well-known brands that offer no- or low-VOC lines. Some of these lines were initially developed to comply with the tough California Air Resources Board, or CARB, standard. Look for labels that claim compliance with CARB or CA standards. This is another easy stock and an easy sell.

3) Offer Low-VOC Duct Sealant

Sealing ducts can increase duct efficiency by 10-15%, and a very green approach to duct efficiency is to seal all duct seams. You can use tape if it is UL 181 compliant (with acrylic- or butyl-based adhesives, not rubber-based, such as duct tape). There are also VOC-free duct sealants from RCD Corp., McGill Airseal Corp., and Hardcast. Offering these sealants provides your customers with a low-cost green product for performing a widely recommended green best practices.

4) Offer Formaldehyde-Free Sheetgoods

Formaldehyde is commonly found in sheetgood adhesives, but it is a known carcinogen. Though there are exotic items such as formaldehyde-free wheatboard products for sale, there are also formaldehyde-free plywoods available, most notably from Columbia Forest Products with its PureBond line. Formaldehyde-free products are a nice alternative to stock (or to offer as a special order) for contractors who have customers asking for formaldehyde-free products.

5) All Trusses are Green

One of the greenest building products you can sell may already be in your yard: trusses. Trusses use small-dimension lumber to achieve the structural stability otherwise offered by large sticks. Floor trusses, such as Universal Forest Products' Open Joist, use secondary demand lumber and finger joinery to optimize the wood resource, which relieves pressure on full-dimension lumber

used for floor joints, such as 2x10s and 2x12s. Parallel chord roof trusses also offer extra space for insulation where the truss meets the top plate, further tightening the building envelope.

6) Cool Roofs

A black roof absorbs 95% of the sun's heat; gray roofs absorb 80%, and white roofs just 75%. When a roof absorbs heat, it transfers it to the house, and that drives up cooling costs.

BASF and 3M have new cool-roof coatings and shingle granules (sold by Elk Premium Building Products), so offering cool-roof (lighter-color or reflective-granule) shingles in your lumberyard can have a measurable affect on how much energy homes consume. For inside attic spaces, LP's radiant barrier, TechShield, offers remarkable heat-stopping abilities.

7) Mold Control

Indoor air quality is a very green feature for homes because it improves the health of the occupants, and mold is one of the leading culprits in poor indoor air quality. To cut down on mold, G-P Gypsum has taken the lead with its Dens line of paperless gypsum board products. These offer excellent mold resistance because the facing is fiberglass, not paper, which means there is no potential food source for mold (or termites). It's also a premium upsell product.

8) Green Up Thy Own House

A green lumberyard can also "go green" by using compact fluorescent light bulbs, paper bags (as opposed to plastic), insulation upgrades to reduce heating and cooling costs, no-idle rules for trucks (especially delivery trucks), and by sheltering pallets of chemicals such as fertilizer that might run off with rain water. Visible efforts to recycle packaging and pallets are also important. Small efforts go a long way here, and the local press may even want to know about your efforts, if you want some positive publicity.

The award-winning author of nine books about home building and a frequent contributor to the industry's leading trade magazines, John D. Wagner is the new Green Editor for LBM Journal.