



Wallcoverings Association

A Wallcovering Environmental Story – A Starting Point

February 16, 2018

Is it time to tell the Wallcovering Environmental Story? The very act of communicating the story needs to be determined. We have been hearing from speakers at annual meetings how information needs to be communicated to a different generation. So just telling a story in print may not be enough. Other mediums may be more effective for some audiences. Another difficulty is that the information we will discuss contains science terms. This is not easy for many people to wrap their arms around. However, the details are important and some scientific discussion is imperative to the story, so how do we keep an audience engaged as we plow through details? What makes this even more complicated is that science was used to justify past practices. So what makes our science better now than before? There are clear answers to this but we need to be prepared for questions that will be asked.

We recently participated in a “Materiality” assessment that was to be used to develop a sustainability strategy. Improving market leadership was part of the intention. We have already completed the development and implementation of the NSF 342 Sustainability Standard which had already placed the wallcovering industry as a thought leader. Other industries have followed our lead to document their environmental transparency diligence. Attacking vinyl wallcovering was not as easy as it used to be because we now know the environmental impacts of making and using wallcovering better than we ever had before. We have reviewed the industry in depth and we have found ways to improve our performance through those issues that we have the ability to control. Many industries have yet to start this process or are just beginning to think about it. Not all problems have immediate solutions, but at least we’re on a steady path to understanding how this industry impacts the environment. We also need to address the positive impacts created by the aesthetics of the products that are produced. More than most other materials, wallcovering provides a way to change the environment of the areas where people live and work. Transformations are possible that draw on the creativity of the designers and the innovation of the manufacturers.

We immediately found that this transparency needed to include product chemical content and potential health or environmental impacts. Can we use the information from this assessment to assist in our environmental communication efforts? Does focusing on life cycle attributes, manufacturing processes, economics, product durability, maintenance, and end of life management options assist in telling a good story? We’ve learned a lot already and it is likely that we will be more informed in the future. So this is a story that evolves and changes as we develop new processes like digital imaging, as we evaluate and approve alternative materials and as we address end of life management practices.

We need to consider many factors to reach the people that ultimately make decisions on what materials are considered for each potential job. Exactly how comprehensive do we need to be?

Consider the following:

- Who cares about the wallcovering environmental story? Can the narrative be effective for a wide audience? What stakeholders can we count on to assist in communicating our story?
- Do we tell the details of former practices that might not reflect favorably on the industry? For instance, in research for this article, former practices over one hundred and fifty years ago included using arsenic pigmentation in the wallcovering. OK, that probably wasn’t such a good idea, but at the time the problems associated with arsenic were not well known. The industry changed and stopped using it. More recently, but still over sixty years ago, DDT pesticide was advertised as a way to protect children against disease carrying insects. Even Rachel Carson stated that “No responsible person contends that insect-borne disease should be ignored,” she wrote in “Silent Spring.” The trouble, in her view, was that DDT and other chemicals were employed so liberally that “the insect enemy” developed resistance to them in fairly short order and was thus “made actually stronger by our efforts.” So we don’t use that anymore either but antimicrobials are still used in some applications but they too are being questioned for the effectiveness.



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- What materials are the best to use for wallcovering products? Obviously, this depends on who you talk to and the conditions where the material will be used. We do know that chemicals of concern are being added to lists all over the place. Whether right or wrong, these lists make manufacturing products even more difficult. Decisions are made based on best available information at the time. Still, the chemicals used and other primary issues are now facing continuing scrutiny. This includes:
 - Antimicrobial impregnated wallpaper
 - Heavy metals in pigmentation
 - Phthalate esters
 - PVC or not PVC
 - Deselection of certain raw materials
 - Dioxin generation as related to fires
 - Endocrine Disruption issues identified with certain chemicals
 - Health issues like mold
 - VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) emissions
 - Recycled content/End of Life issues
 - Industry material ingredient transparency
 - Acoustics
- Regulations and standards also play a vital role in the wallcovering environmental story. The industry responds to many issues in this arena like:
 - Prop 65 in California
 - USGBC, Green Globes or other green building initiatives
 - Facilities Standards for the Public Buildings Service like GSA's P100
 - Our own internal standard WA 101
 - Sustainability Standards like NSF 342
 - Environmental permitting and OSHA safety standards for manufacturing practices
 - EPDs, HPDs, Life Cycle Assessment
 - Durability
 - Design and Quality
- Who needs to participate in the wallcovering environmental story development? This should be a broad group of participants because it needs to reflect your personal growth and how knowing environmental details of manufacturing or distribution affect decisions that your companies choose to take.

So this is proposed as a starting point to continue discussions, identify other areas of importance and begin to define what we want the wallcovering story to be. Your questions and comments will drive the direction that this story takes. We can ask someone else to write this or we can do it ourselves. With the knowledge base of the members of this association, we have the expertise in house to do this if we want too. Are we ready to take this on?

Jeff Rezin

