Wallcoverings Association

A Wallcovering Environmental Story – Part II: How Did We Get Here? **May 22, 2018**

Why are environmental components of an industry taking such a lead role in making wallcoverings? In the days of "business as usual," the goal was to make a good product, sell it, make some more, repeat. Then global concerns began to grow around the impacts of chemicals on people and the environment. In the earlier days, chemistry was respected and perhaps unintended consequences were not predictable. Plastics were seen as solutions to manufacturing processes offering higher quality and longevity. They were also competitively economical to use. Their use grew to the point that we now see plastic applications everywhere. Vinyl wallcovering has a significant plastic component.

As international waste management issues developed, plastics became the whipping post of material selection. But as the use grew, the unintended consequences became more visible. There were single use plastics like Styrofoam containers littering byways, grocery bags found everyplace, 6 ring binders for packaging drinks, and countless other examples of plastics impacting the environment in a negative way. The success of plastic as a material became its own problem by being mismanaged after it was used, the postconsumer phase. Then all plastics began to bear the brunt of negative perception. Scrutiny surrounding the added raw material components also began to gain interest, so the ingredients used to make the wallcovering also began to take on higher levels of interest. Fire retardants, biocides, flexibility additives all became targets for responsible chemical management. Heavy metals, phthalates, vinyl chloride, and other specific chemicals started receiving attention and as a result, any product that contained them was swept up in the hysteria. The safety of products was raised as an issue because of materials the product contains. Then wallcovering companies began getting inquiries about what they were made of, how they were made, and where they were made. The wallcovering industry went from "business as usual" to "can the industry survive these attack" Sales were affected, jobs were affected, profitability was affected. Something had to be done.

Wallcovering provides aesthetic value over an extended period of time. These are not single use products. But that position did little to impact discussions and editorial opportunities by non-government organizations. The chemical industry was called upon to defend their products that were used to manufacture the wallcovering, but success from this avenue of approach did little to mitigate the situation.

In 2007, the wallcovering industry looked to other alternatives. How could the industry take a long term approach to demonstrate that this industry was doing the right things to protect people and the environment from potentially harmful unintended consequences? Using available resources, an investigation into options identified sustainability initiatives as a potential tool. It became obvious that defending products on their own merits as had been the norm was no longer enough. The task of creating an industry specific standard began. Criticism of sustainability standards is that these are construed as marketing tools for products. For others, they represent a way to collect and communicate information about issues that can be taken on by the industry where they have the ability to actually participate and demonstrate that a positive impact is possible from the manufacturing of wallcovering. Critical issues facing the industry were identified and a pathway forward was determined that could be used to show where the industry could impact issues in a positive manner. It also drew the line at where the wallcovering industry would be limited in global concerns, like plastics in the oceans. Identifying where these natural issues boundaries were was important. Not all world problems can be solved by one industry. But if that industry could determine where they were able to have an impact and begin moving in that direction, that was seriously possible.

Borrowing language from weather prediction models, four categories were created to identify possible outcomes of activities that potentially impact weather: Adaptation, Mitigation, Profitability and Suffering are used to describe the rampage impact of weather. As weather models change, we will either suffer from lack of action, for instance flooding in a flood prone area or where initiatives begin which allow adaptation (such as raising buildings or creating protective barrier walls). The term "mitigation" identifies changes that are implemented to reduce the effect of weather issues, which could include changes from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. This is just one of several options currently relying on technological advances to achieve success. Ultimately however, profitability is a key component in these solutions considerations. Solutions that lead to profits will be implemented because of that fact, not necessarily because it also helps solve a world issue.

Using these terms, it was evident the industry was suffering from negative publicity of raw materials even though that made it possible to produce some of the most aesthetically pleasing products ever created. Decreased confidence in product raw material selection resulted in decreased sales potentials. The viability of the industry was at stake. Adaptation to reduced sales and a declining market were not palpable. So, in a bold move, the industry worked together toward mitigating issues through collection of documentation showing what issues the industry could impact and then creating measurable categories to capture where improvements were being made. This initiative became the NSF 342 Sustainability Standard for Wallcovering products. Information about a number of management issues were collected and evaluated as part of a multi-attribute standard. For instance, energy use data showed where consumption was highest and companies began to respond to the data they were collecting. More efficient lighting alternatives were selected; more efficient buildings were occupied; renewable energy choices were made; money on energy use was saved. Attacks on the industry subsided because the industry could now show what it was doing to be part of the solution to particular global issues. The sustainability of the industry is ongoing. Expectations that this industry has a bright future can be realized.

Now, the NSF sustainable standard committee is working on further extending its influence by considering evaluating suppliers. Bringing their information into the mix can show that the wallcovering industry is doing what it can where it has the ability to participate in a solution and reduce negative impacts on society while maintaining its ability to provide innovative aesthetically pleasing wallcovering for a world of varying tastes and expectations. It comes as a surprise to some that both can be accomplished together. This provides the opportunity for a win-win outcome.

Jeff Rezin

REZIN INC