

'Green' Definitions Can Confuse Conscientious Amenity Purchasers - By Glenn Hasek

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Defining what is a 'green' amenity is getting easier but fuzzy definitions of 'pure,' 'organic,' 'natural,' and 'biodegradable' can make the purchasing process for conscientious hoteliers and innkeepers a confusing one.

The terms can apply to not only what is in the amenity bottle but also the bottle itself. An increasing number of amenity companies are offering greener amenity options. While that is good for the lodging industry and good for the environment, weeding through the terminology and what one amenity vendor described as 'marketing hype' can be challenging.

Washington, D.C.-based Green Seal should help clarify the green amenity confusion later this year when it finalizes its Environmental Standard for Soaps and Shower Products GS-44. The products proposed to be included in this standard are liquid soap, solid soap, shampoo, conditioner, bubble bath, and related bath and shower products that are rinsed off the body. Green Seal's new environmental label program is expected to address such important impacts as packaging, aquatic concerns, and toxic ingredients. Until Green Seal releases its voluntary new program and it is adopted by industry vendors, consumers will have to do their homework to fully understand what they are buying.

Suppliers of amenities in the United States are not required to list ingredients in items that are given away in hotels. Regulations vary outside of the United States. Countries in the European Union, for example, are required to list ingredients.

Still Playing Catch-up

'The United States and Canada are still way behind Europe,' says Paul Weber, president of Gravenhurst, Ont.-based SwissSol Inc., whose company is in the process of rolling out a new eco-friendly line of amenities.

'Pure' and 'natural' are ambiguous words that can mean just about anything. 'Natural' ingredients, for example, may have been derived from plants on which pesticides were applied.

'Natural,' 'pure' shampoo could have chemicals,' says Gary Coward, senior vice president, Concept Amenities Inc., Las Vegas.

'Organic' is much easier to understand but still can cause confusion. If a vendor states that a particular ingredient is 'organic,' it usually means that it was derived from a plant on which no pesticides were used.

'There is not one definition of 'organic' for personal care products,' says Cris Pyle, senior director of marketing and product development for Gilchrist & Soames, Indianapolis. 'You can use organic ingredients but that does not make the entire product 'organic.''

Why Preservatives Are Necessary

Most vendors use a combination of natural and synthetic ingredients in their products. Without preservatives, a bottle of shampoo or lotion would have a very limited shelf life. Several vendors agreed that amenities without parabens, formaldehyde, mineral oil, petroleum derivatives, and animal-based products were the closest to being eco-friendly. Sulfates such as sodium lauryl ether sulfate have been criticized as unsafe by some critics. Libby Sheiner, marketing director for Unique Amenities, Monsey, N.Y., says her company's amenity products do not include genetically engineered ingredients. As with the other companies contacted for this article, Unique Amenities does not use animals to test its products.

'Not being tested on animals is not enough to make a product 'green,' Sheiner emphasized, however.

The definition of 'biodegradable' can vary from one vendor to the next. One vendor said that everything is biodegradable over time. Another said that is not the case. The truth is that some amenity liquids (they usually are mostly water) biodegrade faster than others, and some do so with less harm to the environment. Two vendors-RoomService Amenities and Pineapple Hospitality-are currently offering amenity products with bottles mostly made from plastarch material (PSM). PSM is a corn-based material that is more easily biodegradable than petroleum-based plastic.

Time to Ditch Bottles?

From a waste standpoint, the greenest option is to not have amenity bottles at all but to offer shampoo, conditioner and soap with dispensers. The reality, however, according to the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Foundation and Smith Travel Research's 2008 Lodging Survey, is that only 22 percent of lodging properties use them.

Without a recycling program to ensure that amenity bottles do not end up in a landfill, where just about anything can sit and stew for hundreds or thousands of years, what a bottle is made of is of secondary importance. Unique Amenities, realizing the magnitude of amenity bottle waste, just launched a bottle rebate program and is giving its customers the option of returning used bottles to the company for recycling. Unique Amenities is even paying for the shipping.

An important question operators should ask themselves, according to Concept Amenities' Gary Coward is, 'What is the hotel doing on the back end to close the loop?'

Companies including Concept Amenities, Green Suites International, Pineapple Hospitality and others are offering amenity packaging options made from recycled content or that reduce waste. RoomService Amenities is even offering waste-saving bar soap that has a hole in the middle as part of its Green from NATÜRA line.

Most vendors agreed that suppliers that produce personal care products are headed in the right direction in regard to environmental responsibility. It is something their customers are demanding. Until 'green' is better defined in the marketplace, however, there will be some companies that choose to stretch the definitions of words such as 'pure,' 'organic,' 'natural,' and 'biodegradable.'

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