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What Green Really Means

By Rick Schumacher

The velocity with which green building is impacting our industry represents a true revolution. Since the concept of building green is largely shrouded in confusion caused by conflicting product standards and building guidelines, it's no surprise that many in our industry question its validity. This is unfortunate. When you cut through the marketing clutter (which is no small task), at its core, green building means sensible and responsible.

I just returned from the Association of Millwork Distributors (AMD) Annual Convention, where I was fortunate to spend time with two companies who were green long before that was the thing to be. Masisa is a Chile-based company that manufactures and distributes moulding and millwork products throughout North America. If you ask someone from Masisa about their bottom line, they'll ask you which one you mean?

In addition to a bottom line that measures financial performance, Masisa also reports its environmental performance and social performance. This triple bottom line is not a marketing gimmick; it's how the company does business. But it doesn't stop there.

In order to recognize and celebrate these values, the company awarded the first-ever Masisa Green Award to one of its customers in a private ceremony during the AMD convention. I spent some time talking with the folks at Masisa who created and presented the award, as well as the winning company, Alexandria Moulding, Alexandria, Ontario, Canada.

"We believe that given the choice between traditional building materials and those that are healthier and more environmentally friendly, people will always choose the greener product, provided that the greener product is priced the same or only slightly higher," explains Jerry Chabot of Alexandria Moulding. "If we want to make an impact, we need to bring in products that people will buy."

"Green is about doing the right thing," says Dan Schmidt, president of Masisa USA. "It's also about doing the right thing about growing your business."

In many areas, the green building revolution is in the midst of an awkward infancy. Many manufacturers are rushing to "green" their existing products or, in some cases, to develop entirely new lines. Meanwhile, dealers are forced to determine which green products to carry—essentially, by estimating how "green" their market is. At the heart of the conflict, which is no big surprise, is money.

As green products merge into the mainstream, there remains a perception that green building is esoteric, and prohibitively expensive. I'm about to learn how much truth there is to that perception. You see, my wife and I are about to begin construction on a new home. For a number of very practical reasons (such as energy efficiency and indoor air quality), we plan to make our home as green as we can afford. So far, in several cases, the perception is true. For example, geothermal heating/cooling costs much more upfront than traditional methods. But in the long run, the money we'll save on our energy bills should easily justify the initial investment.

For my family, green building means a solid, well-designed house made of healthy, sustainable materials. For someone in the residential construction industry, it could mean change (either welcome or unwelcome); it could be seen as the end of the world as we know it; or (my favorite), it could be seen as a fresh business opportunity.

From a business perspective for someone in the residential construction supply industry, green building equals change—and opportunity.