



## MAINTENANCE AND TECHNOLOGY

by Michael Wilson

# Do You Need a Consultant When Purchasing Cleaning Supplies?

Purchasing cleaning products to operate a private college or university is not the simple process it used to be. The situation is much more complicated today, mainly because purchasers can select from thousands of cleaning products at a variety of price points; some products are more environmentally conscious than others, and some are designed to improve worker productivity or offer superior performance benefits. Trade publications such as *PUPN* can help decision-makers at private colleges and universities know what products are available, which might best serve institutional needs, and introduce products that could best benefit each school. While *PUPN* and similar trade publications can play a vital role in helping steer readers through the cleaning supply maze and confusion, procurement difficulties can still arise.

For those whose role is to be in charge of building services and the purchasing of cleaning products, tools, and equipment, selecting a distributor to manage all this information well and provide customized solutions—while staying within budget and accomplishing campus goals as to cleaning and environmental concerns—can be a great help. Administrators of private colleges

and universities want more than supplies from a janitorial distributor, including the following:

- To have help uncovering their cleaning needs
- To discuss cleaning challenges and needs with their distributor
- To have the distributor identify product options that can address those needs
- To have the distributor evaluate current products, suggesting those that have proven value and others that may need to be replaced
- To allow the distributor to help their customers narrow the alternatives and select the most cost effective cleaning product options
- To watch the working relationship to grow over time
- To benefit from distributor-provided training and after-sale support

Some astute janitorial distributors are taking note of what their customers want. Consequently, they are making change to their traditional marketing role with clients and becoming

“consultants,” advising their clients on cleaning solutions, products, and equipment and help their customers address all of these issues.

### Consultative Selling

Consultative selling evolved after World War II and reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, for a variety of reasons, the concept faltered. However, it has seen a rebirth in the past ten to fifteen years. One of the key reasons for its rebirth was the fact that in the past twenty years or so, the number of distributors in the professional cleaning industry has dwindled dramatically. Some have gone out of business entirely, while others merged with other distributors or were purchased by other companies. Those distributors that remain and are meeting the needs of today’s end-customer realized that a new marketing approach was necessary.

A working definition of consultative selling is “an exchange of information in which the salesperson uncovers and develops a true understanding of a facility’s needs [as it pertains to cleaning and maintenance] and helps them

select products and tools that will address those needs.” The word “uncovers” is very important in this definition. In many ways, this work is the essence of consultative selling. Administrators benefit from what can be termed “hand holding” guidance to help uncover what their cleaning needs are, what their goals are when it comes to cleaning, and most specifically, what types of cleaning products are available that will better serve those needs.

In the 1960s and earlier, there were only a handful of chemical manufacturers in the janitorial industry that were marketing products in the U.S. Now there are scores from all over the world. For instance, the “Buyers Guide” on the ISSA (the worldwide cleaning association) website allows prospective buyers to search for manufacturers of floor finish. Now, there are around 170 manufacturers of floor finish, no longer five or six. Assuming that each company is making five different types of floor finish, consumers have more than 800 brands of floor finish to investigate to determine which are sustainable, which

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Some janitorial distributors now have access to software databases, apps, and online dashboards that can help their clients evaluate many of these brands and select those that best meet specific needs and criteria. These technologies allow the distributor—with their customer at their side—to see and compare hundreds of products.

are not, which are most cost effective, which perform most effectively, and which will work best in the specific institutional setting. Such research can be a major hurdle to tackle.

Private college and university administrators typically do not have the time to analyze all of these products, so help in making buying decisions is often needed. Fortunately, some janitorial distributors now have access to software databases, apps, and online dashboards that can help their clients evaluate many of these brands and select those that best meet specific needs and criteria. These technologies allow the distributor—with their customer at their side—to see and compare hundreds of products. These technologies provide the added information necessary for school administrators to make thoughtful decisions when making product selections.

### Health

Ultimately, the consultative selling approach can be very beneficial for private colleges and universities. One of the best things about this

approach is that it can eliminate the purchase of cleaning products that either are not effective or do not protect the health of those who use a facility. While one of the goals of cleaning is to keep a facility looking its best, the key goal of cleaning is to make sure everyone using that facility stays healthy. When it comes to making these decisions, private college and university administrators are advised not to go it alone, but rather to leverage the knowledge base and technological tools available through a distributor; these resources can facilitate thoughtful cleaning product and equipment decisions.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Michael Wilson is Vice President of Marketing for AFFLINK

(AFFLINK.com), developers of the ELEVATE process, an online system that allows users to learn about and select products that will help operate their facilities in a greener, more sustainable, healthier, and more cost-effective manner.



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