

Deeper Shade of Green

By Holly Barbo

What it Means to be Green

There is growing interest in “green” furniture among manufacturers, retailers and customers. Unfortunately, there is an equal measure of misconception and confusion regarding this important topic. How are we to provide what customers are asking for when we, and they, are working with a variety of definitions of green that are based on misinformation?

Part of the cause of confusion is simply because we, as an industry, are still perfecting green products and working through the discovery of what are truly best practices. But we are trying.

There are three parts to the equation that we need to understand for ourselves and for customers. The equation is a triangle. On one point is green. That does not necessarily mean that the product is recycled, but more that it is earth-friendly/earth-smart and minimizes negative practices. Green is an attitude and the striving for a state that we haven’t yet achieved.

The second point is sustainability. To me, the clearest way to see this is to visualize a landfill. If that item is not well-made, if it is not made of materials that are strong, it will not endure and will quickly end up in a landfill. Sustainability is long-lasting.

The final point of the triangle is the carbon footprint. By that I mean how much energy and fossil fuels are used to make the

product. The amount of energy (whether it is from coal, oil or hydroelectricity) is basically the same for creating a well-made piece of furniture that will last as it is for making a poorly made piece of furniture that will not last very long. Really surprising, isn’t it? So if we are defining green as energy consumption, frequently replacing a piece of unsatisfactory furniture is a bad bargain. If the lifetime of a poorly made sofa is five years and the lifetime of a well-made sofa is 20, then the poorly made sofa will cost us four times more in energy costs. That makes the carbon footprint of the better sofa one quarter of the poorly constructed one.

We need to apply the green triangle in order to get some perspective on the true meaning of sustainable when discussing furniture. Take cow manure particle board as an example. It is green and renewable. Its carbon footprint is probably a little more than regular wood chip particle board because of the extra processing. Its weakest point is in its sustainability. It just isn’t as strong as solid wood or plywood. The average person moves a minimum of 11 times in their lifetime. Just ask movers how they feel about handling particle board furniture. It is too fragile. I’ll bet that each of us has a story we could tell about that particular material, as do our customers!

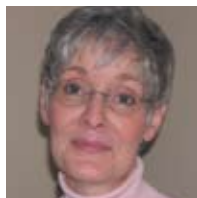
Here is another way to apply the triangle. A well-made piece of furniture may last well beyond the previously stated 20 years. It can be handed down to loved ones, given to charitable organizations or resold because it continues to last. However, if you need to replace a poorly

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made piece of furniture, that piece will inevitably end up in a landfill where it will begin to break down, a furniture version of decomposition. Chemicals used in the particle boards, glues, in the foam and in the fabric treated with fire retardant and stain resistance enter our ground water. This is the same water that farmers use to grow our food, the water that we drink and that eventually flows to the sea.

Consumers are becoming more aware as well. One customer in five now asks about green furniture. The more we understand the true definition of green, the better we can have that conversation with our customers and ultimately provide them with what they want. This learning process about the green triangle is an ongoing dialogue.

Welcome to the discussion. **HFB**



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