



Green Clean

Car washes spout environmentalism with conservative practices

By Andrew Magee

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Larry Kirkbride never thought he'd be labeled an environmentalist. The grizzled 25-year car-wash veteran operates Woodland, Calif.-based K's Car Wash and, even though his tunnel is only 90 minutes from San Francisco, he doesn't groove with California tree-huggers.

Nevertheless, when Ecolab launched Blue Coral Beyond Green, a sustainability-certification program, Kirkbride enlisted. No, he wasn't visited by the ghosts of environments past, present and future on Earth Day Eve. Kirkbride says he simply made a sound business decision.

"If I can get some of the best products out there and they don't have a bunch of hazardous materials in them, I'd be completely stupid to not go that way," Kirkbride says.

"Plus," he says, "you have to do it

because, in California, they regulate the hell out of you.

"You can't do nearly enough to keep these people off your back. I've been using Blue Coral anyway because it's an extremely good product. When they came up with this program, which I saw

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LARRY KIRKBRIDE *K's Car Wash*

at the [International Carwash Association] show, I called the distributor and told him I wanted to get on this because that gives me the needed ammunition should the environmentalists start

clamping down on me."

Even though Kirkbride isn't exactly channeling his inner Al Gore, his story shows just how far the green movement has come. If a car-wash operator such as Larry Kirkbride, whose biggest environmental concern is environmentalists, has green on his radar, imagine how much progress can be made in an industry rife with environmental issues ranging from water consumption to energy usage and detergent phosphates.

Ecolab's certification program ensures that the chemistry used to produce its vehicle-care products eliminates harmful substances such as phosphates and meets volatile-organic-compound (VOC) compliance

no matter where a car wash is located in North America. To become certified, a car-wash operator has to buy all of his or her chemicals and detergents from Ecolab Inc.

"When we launched it in April, I completely misjudged what would happen," says Mark Miller, vice president of vehicle care for St. Paul, Minn.-based Ecolab. "I figured it would take a while to ramp up and educate our customers, so I thought that we'd have about 300 certified customers by the end of the year."

Instead? "To date, we have more than 2,000 locations certified."

Cynics might say the certification program is more about helping Ecolab gain share than helping the environment. Miller understands people's concerns, because there is no governing body regulating sustainability in the industry; so, in this case, there's no way to certify the certifier.

"The big question people ask is, 'Is this real?'" Miller says. "We are a \$5.5-billion provider of specialty chemistry in a variety of different industries. In many of those industries, there are organizations that have set up codes to determine sustainability.

"In the car-wash industry, there is no such entity. In absence of that, we use standards from a variety of other industries that we serve and use those as our model of sustainability."

Miller doesn't apologize for the sales lift that Blue Coral Beyond Green provides. He says Ecolab and its certified customers are satisfying a need in the marketplace.

"Consumers are becoming more conscious about this and changing their purchase behavior based on the environmental profile of the products

they're buying, whether it's food, toilet paper or car washes," Miller says. "Part of what we do in our program is merchandising. It's one of those perks; we can all say that we're sustainable. You can only get it when you're certified."

Reclaims Adjustment

About 20 minutes Southeast of Kirkbride's car wash, Splash & Dash Car Wash made history in July by becoming the first car wash to be certified by the Sacramento Business Environmental Resource Center as a sustainable business. Certification standards vary, but receiving the "sustainable business" label usually means that a company is green in every way possible: from construction to power consumption and making sure there's a recycling bin under every desk.

In August, just one month after receiving certification, Splash & Dash

operator Jason Johnson and his partners, who own six California locations, acquired a seven-location Texas chain named Quick Quack Car Wash and subsequently dubbed all the sites Quick Quack.

What hasn't changed is a priority first outlined on a piece of paper when Johnson and his cohorts launched their concept in 2001: sustainability and conservation.

"We have not yet been able to take our other car washes through the process, but all of our car washes operate the same way," Johnson says. "We thought it was the right thing to do and it's something that drives us as an organization. In addition to that, we think it's something that's going to be required in the future. Certainly, we're not required to do what we do now, but the time is coming when we will. Lastly, we think consumers feel the same way as we do.

Dirty Driveway Washes

Jason Johnson, owner of Quick Quack Car Wash, believes that professional car washes should do everything possible to reduce water and energy consumption. He walks the walk, considering the fact that one of his washes earned certification for being a sustainable business. However, Johnson says the industry's environmental issues pale in comparison to the damage created by do-it-yourselfers.

"[Driveway washing] places an incredible cost on the environment, not just in terms of water consumption: The soap and the phosphates from the car that go into the storm drain cause incredible damage to the streams and rivers," Johnson says. "At some point, people are going to realize that driveway washing is really bad."

The results from a 2006 study conducted by Issaquah, Wash.-based Environmental Partners Inc. prove Johnson's point.

In the study, fish-toxicity tests were performed using a water sample collected from a car-wash fund-raiser and compared to drinkable water. The car-wash sample killed 100% of the fish while all the fish survived in the potable water.

Detergents, even biodegradable ones, can damage gills, wash away natural oils that enable fish to absorb oxygen and destroy protective mucus membranes. Car-wash operators who market themselves as sustainable or green businesses can use this information to not only help the environment but also increase sales by collaborating with nonprofits to raise money by selling discounted car-wash vouchers or offering free washes to build community goodwill.



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To be certified as a sustainable business, Johnson had to verify that his car washes use only biodegradable and nontoxic soaps, install motion-detector lighting, recycle, advertise on recyclable paper and reclaim 100% of the water used in their 100-foot tunnels.

“There are a number of ways to reclaim water,” Johnson says. “In the one we use, water goes from the dirty-water tank to a middle tank, where it is pumped into the reclaim system and, after it’s cleaned, placed into a clean-water tank. So there are three 1,500-gallon tanks under there.”

Those three tanks, including installation, cost \$30,000 and Quick Quack invested another \$30,000 in the reclaim system equipment. “That doesn’t include plumbing or installation for the reclaim system,” Johnson says. “There’s a lot of custom construction just to set that up. There are less-expensive ones out there, but those contribute to the bad rep that reclaim systems get: that the water is still

dirty and it smells. If your water smells, you bought the wrong reclaim system.”

Reclaim systems enable car-wash operators to improve both the environment and the bottom line because the systems reduce water consumption and, therefore, water and sewer bills. Many operators, however, struggle with the decision to invest in a reclaim system. Kirkbride, for instance, considered installing a reclaim system but was dissuaded by a \$50,000 price tag.

“It’s not necessarily the system that costs that much, but it would mean cutting up my concrete, digging a huge hole and setting great big precast concrete tanks into the ground to get this type of system to work,” Kirkbride says. “Then you have to figure out how you get your return lines back into your

equipment room.”

Unfortunately for Kirkbride, skyrocketing sewer bills might force him to install a reclaim system before he’s ready to do so, even if it means borrowing money. “In California, they pass these standards and the local municipality has to continue upgrading their sewer-treatment plant. The more money they have to put in to meet the standards, the more they charge you for the sewer,” he says.

“So my water bill might be \$500 per month, but my sewer bill might be \$1,500 per month. It’s a ‘dollars and sense’ issue. When the sewer rates get so high that it’s costing you too many dollars, then it starts making sense to put it in.”

Kirkbride plans to build a new car wash in 2009, and he incorporated a reclaim system into the plans. “Nowadays, when you build a new wash, you have to incorporate it in right from the beginning,” he says. “Then, as the changes come about to reclaim systems themselves, you should be able to update and get better water to use for the final rinse rather than having to use fresh water.”



QUICK AND CLEAN: The D&S Quicksilver Touchless in-bay automatic is designed to wash any size vehicle. The concept of “green” is engineered into the machine to maximize its cleaning power but to minimize consumption of water, chemicals and power.

Software Solutions

As a supplier, Brian Templeton fields more questions than ever before from customers itching to save water and energy. He’s also a car-wash operator, so he’s intimately aware of their challenges. Templeton owns and operates 20 washes in southern Missouri and he’s also a partner in High Ridge, Mo.-based D&S Car Wash Equipment Co.

“It’s a trend that the econ-

omy has forced on operators,” Templeton says. “The three main categories of being green in a car wash are water conservation, power management and chemical control. As a manufacturer, we can only engineer green into our equipment. The rest of it is up to the individual owner to develop a green strategy, whether it’s a reclaim system or solar power or whatever else.”

Templeton advises operators to focus on reducing water and sewer bills because, as an owner, they’ve become his biggest expense: “A typical operator is spending 10% [of his or her budget] in chemicals and 12% in water and sewer bills. The price of chemicals has gone up as well because the cost of raw materials has increased.”

One part of the solution, as Templeton sees it, is software that can monitor and control the output of water, energy

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JASON JOHNSON *Quick Quack Car Wash*

and chemicals. “When I first got into the business, our base unit could clean about every bug off a car, but we were pushing 80 gallons per automatic wash to do it. Years ago, maybe that wasn’t a big deal, but it is a big deal now.”

D&S has developed a software system that helps clients reduce costs. “We set the machines to optimize the wash so it controls the water, power and chemicals to the 10th degree, whereas before that wasn’t possible,” Templeton says. “Water consumption is down . . . to about 60 gallons per wash.”

Energy costs aren’t poised for a slowdown any time soon, so the green issue should remain on the front burner for quite a while. In fact, the issue could become more pressing if energy prices in the United States catch up to prices in Europe.

“In most parts of the U.S., the cost of water and electricity is still pretty cheap,” says Steve Robinson, marketing director for Arvada, Colo.-based Mark VII. “We’re owned by a European company based in Germany, so we’re very much in tune to what’s going on in the European market.

“There, the cost of water and energy has been much higher than it is in the U.S. for many years,” he continues. “It’s not something that someone who is buying a car wash in the U.S. for the first time is particularly focused on. That’s changing, though, and it’s going to change dramatically.” ■