

Will Hand Dryers Blow Away Their ‘Green’ Competition?

Facility managers are rethinking their stance on hand dryers—especially those who are focusing on green in their buildings



For some time now, hand dryers have remained in the background of most restrooms. Other hand-drying methods, such as paper and cloth towels, have always seemed to hog the spotlight — many people preferred them.

However, as more state and federal initiatives are being enacted that encourage environmentally preferable products, hand dryers are being viewed in a whole new light. Buyers are recognizing the value in their efficiency, their “green” properties and their ability to reduce labor costs.

Most people do not realize the drastic improvements that have occurred within the world of hand dryers. There are many newer models that offer superior hand-drying abilities, and building supervisors are becoming more aware of the benefits of placing hand dryers in their facilities.

Sanitary Maintenance recently had the opportunity to talk with a few facility service providers to see why people have been changing the way they dry their hands.

The Cost Factor

Facilities are constantly working within budget constraints — there is only so much money available to spend on hand-drying methods. For this reason, many managers have historically avoided even looking at hand dryers as an option, favoring hand towels instead.

Some facility managers, however, argue that hand dryers actually cost less than paper in the long run.

There are two types of costs facility managers consider — the monetary cost and the time cost. According to some facility managers, hand dryers are more effective on both fronts.

“[Hand dryers] are basically installed for the convenience of the facility managers,” says John Underkoffler, a cleaning contractor and customer of BCB Janitorial Supply, Hackensack, N.J. “It is a lot less expensive way to dry people’s hands.”

On paper, it may appear that the initial cost of the hand dryers is more than what many facilities can afford, but they may actually be the long-term cost savers.

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"Absolutely there is an initial cost, but the cost of paper toweling, the landfill costs and the decision-making that one should make all outweigh the initial cost," says Gary Homesley, assistant director of facilities and maintenance of the University Student Union at California State Northridge.

With hand dryers, there is no need to buy towels to refill dispensers, and the unit is always ready to perform — there's no chance of run-outs. Underkoffler adds that paper toweling is a lifetime cost — you will always need more toweling. Plus, facilities spend more money on waste pickup.

"Plus, there is less work for the maintenance team because they do not have to refill or change trash as often," Homesley explains. Hand dryers can also limit or prevent the amount of waste left by paper-towel dispensers, he adds. Before he installed hand dryers, "There was always paper toweling all over the floors and sinks," he says.

With less upkeep in restrooms, cleaning staff can spend extra time on other tasks. They are more readily available to make sure that the needs of the patrons, occupants or visitors are being met and that the occupants are left with a good impression of the cleanliness of the environment.

A decrease in vandalism also helps to keep restrooms orderly. With less vandalism there is less mess left behind and machines continue to work properly.

"Surprisingly, [with the switch] vandalism has decreased," says Homesley. "It is as if people respect the bathrooms now. They used to break the dispensers, take them, and open them and steal large amounts of towels. The hand dryers are well-built units that are indestructible."

Turning Green

In many states, bettering the environment has become a topic of discussion and action. State governments are changing their regulations and implementing programs, such as recycling initiatives, to help cut down on landfill waste.

State governments have also been instrumental in promoting the six elements of "green building" that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has created.

These elements help to promote cleaner construction of buildings, and a cleaner, more environmentally friendly way of running them.

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These elements include: Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, Water Stewardship, Environmentally Preferable Building Materials and Specifications, Waste Reduction, Indoor Environment and Smart Growth and Sustainable Development.

Many buildings are now being built with environmental regulation in mind. As for the buildings constructed before the initiatives were developed, an increasing number of facility managers are converting their facilities into green buildings.

“We have switched over to being a totally green facility and a totally hands-free environment,” says Homesley. “We currently have 25 hand dryers, and there are not any paper-towel dispensers that are accessible to the public.”

One fear for managers is that customers will not respond well to the change-over to hand dryers. However, Homesley says that the hand dryers he installed are state-of-the-art and efficient.

Underkoffler adds that while some customers may be skeptical at first, green-minded individuals inevitably prefer the hand dryers due to their environmental benefits.

If customers do not like a product, then that dispenser or dryer will end up being replaced. If a facility manager chooses the right dryer for their customer’s facility, then the customers will eventually accept the switch; it is all just a matter of time.

But how do you know if the hand dryer is right for your customers?

“My top demand was efficiency,” says Homesley. “Whatever was the most efficient, worked well and was not energy-wasting. The product has to meet certain green specs to be placed in my green facility.”

There are a few different ways to find a hand dryer that meets green regulations. First, you can go by recommendation and reputation. For instance, EPA’s Web site will help you to find greener products that meet certain product standards.

Secondly, managers can usually request testers or a prototype of the product to be placed in their facility to see how patrons react to it, and how efficiently it actually runs.

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“We usually test the product in our facilities,” says Everett McDonald, housekeeping supervisor of Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport.

“We place [the dispensers] in one extremely busy area first to see how it performs before we place it in other parts of the building.”

By testing the dryer, facility managers can introduce the new product to the customers without an immediate commitment. “It was a learning curve for people, but they became accustomed fast,” says Homesley of his own experience.

Why Switch?

While there are many financial benefits to switching to hand dryers, perhaps the greatest reason for a switch is because of the environmental impact. “My decision to get rid of the paper toweling was one to keep more waste out of the landfills,” says Homesley.

Even the environmentally safe alternative to hand dryers — recycled paper — has a few drawbacks related to its “green” properties.

“To make one ton of recycled paper, it takes 7,000 gallons of water, 360 gallons of oil, 158 million BTUs of energy, and 86 pounds of pollutants go into the atmosphere,” Homesley notes.

By becoming a green facility or just taking it upon yourselves to install the new and improved hand dryers, waste will be reduced and the environment will benefit.

“As a native Californian, I [made the switch] to try to be more environmentally sound,” says Homesley. “It shows a good example for the students [at Northridge] and it shows them where their money is going.”