



Saving Green

Responsible purchasing
saves resources and
money

by Jonathan Cohen

Institutional purchasers – including local, state, and federal government agencies, universities, private companies, and nonprofit organizations – represent tremendous purchasing power. State and local governments spend more than US\$400 billion, and colleges and universities spend more than US\$300 billion, on products and services every year. Private companies spend even more and the federal government, as a whole, is the largest purchaser in the United States.

The role of the Canadian and US governments in purchasing has also increased due to unprecedented stimulus spending, and in particular, green stimulus.

Institutions increasingly are buying products that take into account their

social and environmental impacts, but they are not always sure what the issues are and what to buy.

The Responsible Purchasing Network (RPN) is an institutional membership network of government agencies, businesses, universities and nonprofit organizations dedicated to socially responsible and environmentally sustainable purchasing. RPN promotes and practices responsible purchasing by identifying best practices; developing effective purchasing tools; educating the market; and utilizing its collective purchasing power to maximize environmental stewardship, protect human health, and support local and global sustainability. RPN is advised by a voluntary steering committee of leading procurement stakeholders from government, industry, educational

Summit: Canada's magazine on public sector purchasing

institutions, standards setting organizations, and related organizations.

Since launching in 2005 at a White House conference, RPN has grown to 250 members in North America and around the world, including Australia; Canada; Germany; Italy; Mexico; Puerto Rico; US federal, state, and local government agencies; corporations like Office Depot; universities like Yale; and nonprofit organizations like WWF. RPN members in Canada hail from areas such as Calgary, Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Quebec, and Toronto.

To date, RPN has developed resources that include publication of 15 responsible purchasing guides concerning products purchased in volume by institutions, such as paint, lighting, cleaning products, computers, and office electronics. Further, we have developed a database of thousands of green-certified institutional products, policies and specifications, and worked directly with institutions in each sector to adopt policies and practices, and make purchases that build a stronger marketplace for socially and environmentally responsible products. For example, we worked with the US House of Representatives, which uses approximately 70 million pieces of paper annually, to exclusively carry 100 percent post-consumer waste paper in its office supply store.

The US federal government – the largest purchaser of responsible products in North America – has a long tradition of using its purchasing power to drive markets. Most recently, on October 5, 2009 President Barack Obama issued Executive Order 13514, which mandated

a new policy to “leverage agency acquisitions to foster markets for sustainable technologies and environmentally preferable materials, products and services.” In January 2007, President George W. Bush issued Executive Order 13423, which set purchasing goals and requirements for federal agencies in the areas of energy efficiency, renewable energy, toxics reduction, fleets and water conservation. The US Air Force, Environmental Protection Agency, and Department of Energy are among the top 15 purchasers of green power in the country.

Over 650 university presidents have signed the President’s Climate Commitment, setting out to inventory and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from campus operations. Purchasing will play a key role in achieving these reductions. Universities are increasingly taking steps to dramatically green their campuses through efforts such as forming student-faculty-administration bodies and initiatives, as well as implementing new responsible purchasing policies.

In March 2009, the University of Winnipeg became the first Canadian school to ban bottled water. Subsequently, Memorial University of Newfoundland became the second school in September 2009.

Brown University was the first Ivy League school to pledge to stop using bottled water following a student campaign. In a typical year, the university distributed as many as 250,000 bottles of water on campus, according to the *Providence Journal* newspaper, which undermines funding and support for public water supplies,

consumes millions of barrels of oil in the production plastic water bottles, is much less regulated and inspected than public water, and largely ends up in landfills rather than getting recycled. Leading universities now see green purchasing policies as a way of demonstrating their commitment to the future and as a powerful tool for attracting talented students.

Private sector surveys have shown that companies are greening not only their own operations but also those of their supply chains, with numbers as high as 98 percent expecting this trend to grow. WalMart, in particular, has been using its market presence to demand green-house gas accounting and reduced packaging from its suppliers.

Cities as diverse as Seattle, Charlotte, and New York City have taken measurable and visible steps toward responsible procurement. Seattle announced a new initiative in March 2010 to offer free installation of energy-efficient products to seniors, low-income residents, and non-English speaking households. Seattle City Light, receiving US\$500,000 in federal stimulus funds and investing an additional US\$1.2 million, estimates that 2.5 million kilowatt-hours of electricity will be saved for every 5,000 homes. The Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) has been awarded US\$3 million in stimulus funds for the procurement of six hybrid buses as part of its clean air initiative. CATS estimates that the new hybrid buses will save over 19,000 gallons of fuel annually and remove 2,600 tons of carbon dioxide from the air over the next 12 years. The New York City Police Department introduced

hybrids for patrols, and Mayor Bloomberg announced a goal of converting all New York City taxis to hybrids by 2012.

Provinces and states are also demonstrating leadership. On April 26, 2010 the Premier of Nova Scotia, Darrell Dexter, announced that Nova Scotia would become the first province in Canada to ban bottled water. He has asked the Department of the Environment to develop a policy that commits his government to this new practice. Some states, like California, Massachusetts and Minnesota, have a long-established track record of

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responsible purchasing. Colorado, Maine, Texas and Hawaii now have responsible purchasing policies and are joined by a growing number of other state governments.

Across geography and economic sectors, the growing trend to responsible institutional purchasing is playing a key role in a revolution of product design, use and disposal. RPN acts as both an information clearinghouse for these trends and as a source of tools and resources to reduce the legwork and eliminate the guesswork for responsible purchasing:

- RPN responsible purchasing guides help governments, universities, companies and other large institutions identify and purchase products that are safer for humans and less dangerous for the environment. We cover

products such as vehicles, green power, computers and other office electronics, cleaners, paint, lighting, carpeting and more.

- We rely on credible certifications and verifiable standards that allow purchasers to quickly and easily specify products with improved social and environmental attributes without compromising performance or cost-effectiveness.
- We host regular webcasts for purchasers to learn about new products standards, policy tools, and improved procurement practices on timely products – our new *Responsible Purchasing Guide for Saving Green* will list the “Top 10 Money Saving Green Products.” 

Jonathan Cohen is the director of Workplace Programs and the Responsible Purchasing Network at the Center for a New American Dream (www.responsiblepurchasing.org).