



Product Chemicals Management for Retailers: Moving Beyond Compliance Toward Safer, Less-Toxic Product Lines

Hosted by West Marine
Watsonville, California

May 3, 2011

Meeting Summary

Introduction

The Product Chemicals Management for Retailers Meeting was hosted by West Marine in Watsonville, CA, on May 3, 2011. This business to business event brought together over 40 proactive retailers and other stakeholders engaged in dialog about the challenges and solutions to safer chemicals management in the products sold in retail. There have been numerous dialogs regarding sustainability in the retail sector but none focused specifically on chemicals. Specific objectives of the meeting included:

- Sharing experiences of retailers in overcoming challenges to understanding chemical ingredients and toxicity and providing safer products; and
- Providing models of tools and collaborations to advance safer products in retail; and providing opportunities for networking in a non-competitive space.

The Lowell Center for Sustainable Production and the Green Chemistry and Commerce Council (GC3) recognize that retailers are in a unique and important position to influence supply chains towards safer chemistry. Market campaigns, policies, and consumer pressure are often directed at the point of sale of products and when retailers act in response to such initiatives they have the potential to support innovation in safer materials. Nonetheless, they are faced with numerous challenges in innovating towards safer products including: varying levels of knowledge and technical understanding of product chemistry and alternatives; a lack of good data on chemical ingredients, toxicity, and alternatives; complex supply chains with thousands of products, chemicals, suppliers and limited power beyond tier I suppliers; limited incentives; and technical barriers. Their interest in safer chemistry in products is growing as:

- Regulatory requirements around products increase in Europe and at the state level in the US;
- Consumer, advocate and media demand for safer products grows;
- Confusion about “green” or “safer” products increases; and
- The benefits of cost savings and consumer trust resulting from safer chemistry is realized.

Discussions

The agenda for the workshop combined presentations, case studies and open discussions focused around:

- The role of retailers in moving beyond compliance to safer, less toxic product lines;
- The market, policy, and scientific drivers of safer products;
- The ways in which retailers are collaborating with and impacting their supply chains towards safer chemistry;
- Product chemicals management solutions and tools for retailers; and
- Challenges and opportunities for enhanced chemicals management through supply chains.

General observations and next steps

Some common themes and suggestions for next steps evolved from the presentations and discussions. These included:

- Sustainability is a team sport and it is going to take the whole supply chain to make change towards safer chemicals and products. Collaboration across supply chains is critical.
 - Issues around safer chemicals and products are ripe for precompetitive collaboration and communication.
- There are still significant barriers to understanding product chemistry, toxicity and alternatives. For example Confidential Business Information continues to be a large problem. Hence it is important to understand where the “curtain of confidentiality” lies and what data should be considered as trade secrets and what data are necessary for transparency, accountability and trust to ensure a transition to safer products.
- There is no such thing as a sustainable product. A more sophisticated public is asking for such products but may not know what that means. Transitioning to safer products can be helped by:
 - Defining the criteria for safer products.
 - Harmonizing data collection so a similar set of data/questions is asked of suppliers.
 - Developing alternatives assessment tools that identify safer alternatives. This will also encourage suppliers to supply alternative products.
 - Developing one consistent way to evaluate hazard and identify better to worse chemicals.
 - Educating a retailer’s internal workforce e.g. leaders, attorneys, etc.
 - Aligning with the Federal Trade Commission’s Green Marketing guidelines so there is no advantage being gained from interpreting the guidelines differently.
- There is a need to engage a broader range of retailers, including on-line retailers, in the discussion.
- There is a need to understand what collaborations and activities are already underway around chemicals and sustainability in the retail sector so as to minimize overlaps and ensure synergies. Understanding the role of trade groups like RILA for example are important. This would help better define where opportunities lie to advance safer products.

Some areas of next steps discussed by the group included:

- Engaging more key retailers in the discussion. Webinars were suggested to:
 - Introduce retailers to issues surrounding safer chemicals and products, including tools, collaborative strategies, etc.
 - Identify common problems retailers face and to develop a plan to collaboratively address these.
 - Continue discussions with leading retailers with the goal of developing collaborative projects.
- Mapping the “green retail space” to:
 - Identify existing sustainability collaborations involving retailers, including their missions and scopes of work. This would give an overview of what issues are being tackled and what are not, and will help identify gaps that need to be filled.
 - Identify meetings / conferences on chemicals and sustainability and how these would benefit retailers.
- Bringing product manufacturers into the discussion to engage with retailers to collaboratively solve product chemicals challenges.