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ILLUSTRATION: SCOTT ANNIS

DEBORAH GREEN

Creating an army of green plumbers

How can we expect homeowners and business people to be serious and knowledgeable about water and energy conservation unless the plumbers that bring the water and energy to their houses are equally serious and knowledgeable? “How valuable would it be if plumbers were part of the [conservation] solution?” asks Stephen Lehtonen, founder of GreenPlumbers USA. “Priceless!” answers the utility water conservation coordinator. From fixing leaks to replacing fixtures, the plumber is on the frontlines. “Once consumers know about the GreenPlumbers concept, they will prefer, even demand, a GreenPlumber—not only to save them money but to protect our environment,” said Lehtonen.

NEW TO THE UNITED STATES,
GREENPLUMBERS USA TURNS
PLUMBERS INTO CONSERVATION
EXPERTS AND ALLIES IN THE
CONSERVATION EFFORT.

AUSTRALIA'S SEVERE DROUGHT GIVES BIRTH TO GREENPLUMBERS

The GreenPlumbers® program was first developed in Australia in 2000 as a result of the severe drought that continues in that country today. With more than 6,000 plumbers representing more than 3,500 plumbing businesses having completed one or more training sessions, authorities have seen water consumption in Australia reduced as much as 50% from 1990 levels.

Lehtonen, who is chief executive officer of the Plumbing, Heating, and Cooling Contractors of California, has worked as an association executive, educator, and lobbyist for the plumbing industry for 30 years. He learned about the Australian program and created the US franchise in 2007. Since then GreenPlumbers USA has held more than 75 workshops and trained more than 3,000 plumbers. The workshops debuted in Sacramento, Calif., and have now been held in Atlanta, Ga.; Charlotte, N.C.; New York, N.Y.; Chicago, Ill.; Clearwater, Fla.; and other cities around the country. All of the courses have been offered in Las Vegas, Nev., at the past two years' Water Smart Innovations conferences.

Publicity for the workshops is done primarily through plumbing trade organizations and by word of mouth, with upcoming workshops listed and registration carried out through the GreenPlumbers® website. “All of the courses have been very high quality, providing a lot of new information,” according to Bruce Thornton, owner of Associated Plumbers Inc. in Milton, Mass., who has traveled as far as Charlotte and Las Vegas to complete the courses. “Utilizing the latest in plumbing technology will save my clients money in the long run.”

ACQUIRING THE GREENPLUMBER LOGO

Intended as a comprehensive industry response to climate change and water issues, the program is open to all plumbers, regardless of affiliation or association membership. To actually use the GreenPlumber logo and be referred as a GreenPlumber involves completing specific coursework and signing a separate licensing agreement. Plumbers are listed on the GreenPlumbers website as they complete the courses, and customers looking for a plumber who has achieved accreditation can search for such a plumber by zip code in their geographic area.

The five-course accreditation program comprises Caring For Our Water, Water Efficient Technology, Climate Care, Solar Hot Water, and Inspection Report Service. A class is either 4 or 8 hours long, and consists of lectures, demonstrations, and testing, with the program totaling 32 hours. Additional optional classes are being added, and classes are now being put into an online format to make them even more accessible.

Bill Maddaus, a national expert in water efficiency, compares water savings from products versus behavioral conservation strategies and recommends a 90% emphasis on technical changes, i.e., efficient plumbing fixtures, and only 10% emphasis on behavioral changes, such as shorter showers or reduced irrigation. His

recommendations have been followed by the Marin, Calif., Municipal Water District in its 2007 Water Conservation Master Plan and by other utilities as well. With the choice of plumbing fixtures being so critical, though, how does a customer know whose advice to take?

A plumber has the ability to effectively influence the purchasing decision of homeowners. Because the plumber-homeowner interface is important in appliance purchase decisions, partners have been secured from manufacturers and manufacturers' groups. For example, Caroma, a longtime partner of the Australian program, became a premier partner in GreenPlumbers USA in October 2008. As of October 2009, Caroma had been joined by American Standard, Kohler, Delta, Sloan, Heliodyne, Watts, Grundfos, Waterpik, AOSmith, Fluidmaster, Meadow Springs, Sungrabber Solar Water Heaters, and Masco Corporation, and the acquisition of new partnerships continues.

IAPMO AND GREENPLUMBERS PARTNER TO DEVELOP MORE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

The International Association of Plumbing and Mechanical Officials (IAPMO) has recently signed a memorandum of understanding with GreenPlumbers USA to enhance the technical content of GreenPlumbers' training and accreditation modules by extracting provisions contained within IAPMO's Uniform Codes. IAPMO and GreenPlumbers will also partner to develop additional programs and services that will advance the sustainability goals of both organizations. Water agencies are also becoming partners and are being listed on the GreenPlumbers website as they promote the program.

Enthusiastic and knowledgeable instructors have come from both the plumbing and water conservation community. Doug Kirk, instructor and director of course material for GreenPlumbers, is a second-generation plumber with almost 40 years in



PHOTO: DEBORAH GREEN

Gary Klein demonstrates structural plumbing while teaching the Climate Care Class at the WaterSmart Innovations Conference in 2008.

the trade. “Progressive plumbers are excited to learn new information. One class, one plumber at a time, GreenPlumbers is changing the industry and revitalizing business,” said Kirk.

John Koeller is a professional engineer who is recognized in the United States and Canada as an expert on water-efficient technologies and products. Koeller is one of the two consultants hired through the California Urban Water Conservation Council to develop maximum performance (MaP) testing for toilets, in a program funded by 22 US and Canadian water agencies. “The GreenPlumbers workshops clearly fill a long-standing need for better communication between the water-efficiency folks and the plumbing trades,” said Koehler. “These classes [provide an] opportunity to dispel some of the myths about how some of the new technologies function.”

Eddie Wilcut, now of Caroma USA, previously managed San Antonio Water System's water conservation retrofit program that in 2007 replaced 27,000 older toilets with high-efficiency toilets. Wilcut was videotaped flushing potatoes down a toilet to prove how well the toilets in the program worked, and the video ended up on YouTube. His enthusiasm was what convinced Lehtonen and program manager Carrie McChesney to bring him in as an instructor. “The best thing about teaching for GreenPlumbers is that it

[allows] me to learn as much from the plumbers as they learn from me,” said Wilcut. “One of the most rewarding things for me happened through the Inspection Report Service course. One plumber who took the course made a proposal to a nursing home to improve its water efficiency, starting with a water audit. This went so well that the young man secured a contract with the local nursing home’s entire national firm. He and his wife then launched an extremely successful business. Cases like this make it really worth it,” said Wilcut.

Gary Klein is the leading expert on efficient use of hot water. He is managing director of Affiliated International Management LLC, a firm that provides consulting on sustainability through its team of international affiliates. He begins the Climate Care course explaining “Whatever your views on Global Warming, 67% of your customers believe we are responsible, and we need to be informed to speak to them.” Water heating, he points out “makes up the first or second largest residential energy end-use, 15–30% of a house’s total energy pie.” He ends his Climate Care class with several of the participants assisting him in the layout of a water- and energy-efficient “structural” plumbing system.

PLUMBERS ARE PARTNERS IN THE CONSERVATION EFFORT

The GreenPlumbers® program is reshaping the image of the plumber into one of someone who protects the resources of the planet and who is vital to the health and well being of the country. From the point of view of the plumber who makes the effort to go through the program, it is an opportunity to learn as well as to obtain a new credential. Joey Schwab, owner of both S & S Plumbing and Bob Rizi Plumbing in Sarasota, Fla., traveled to Clearwater and Las Vegas to complete the courses. “Obviously in water conservation you have the utilities and the end user, but somewhere in the middle is

the plumbing or irrigation contractor. Getting these contractors on board [with the conservation effort] is really important. I really appreciated going through the ins and outs of all the products,” said Schwab. “For instance, every plumber has a bad taste in his mouth about the first generation of 1.6-gallon per flush toilets. When we hear about 1.28-gallon per flush toilets, we initially have a lot of hesitation [about recommending such a product],” he continued. “My company does plumbing installation in very high-end homes and when plumbing reps come plugging their new toilets, we always ask for one to test. We must have had 25 toilets in our shop over the years. Once we find one that works well, we recommend that one. So I was very interested to learn about the MaP testing that John Koeller has worked on. I hadn’t heard of that before the classes. Now I look up the MaP ratings on all toilets I may be installing. This really helps ferret out the good products from those that are just green-washed.” Schwab, who now teaches in the program, also hadn’t heard about the US Environmental Protection Agency’s (USEPA’s) WaterSense® program before taking his first GreenPlumbers course, but now he promotes the use of WaterSense-labeled products.

The GreenPlumbers website has recently been expanded to provide information not just for plumbers but for the general public. Through the website, the consumer can request a 50-point water audit by a GreenPlumber in his or her area. The site also lists the availability of rebates on plumbing fixtures throughout the United States and provides links to product information as well as links to water conservation and energy-efficiency sites.

The GreenPlumbers Training and Accreditation program is run by the Plumbing, Heating, and Cooling Contractors of California Education Foundation, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation. The primary funding

sources for the workshops are government agencies, utilities, and manufacturers. Thanks to these sponsorships, the workshops were offered free to plumbers in the first two years of the program, and even now prices are kept reasonable. According to the Alliance for Water Efficiency’s Executive Director Mary Ann Dickinson, “The Alliance for Water Efficiency is pleased to be part of the GreenPlumbers USA program. This national partnership with GreenPlumbers will multiply the efforts of both organizations and yield tremendous results for water and energy conservation in the United States.”

GREENPLUMBERS RECOGNIZED BY USEPA

USEPA awarded the GreenPlumbers an environmental award, which it presents to groups and individuals who are making a difference in the health of our planet, at its eleventh awards ceremony on Earth Day 2009. To learn more about GreenPlumbers, visit www.greenplumbersusa.com or call (888) 929-6207.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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