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Encouraging signs that green future near

By Tom Watson

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We'll know environmental awareness has been achieved when nobody talks about it anymore.

We won't need to "go green" because we'll be there already. A green sensibility will be incorporated seamlessly into all areas of our lives, and ideally it will make our lives better. Green will become the new normal.

That could just be a pipe dream, but we're actually seeing some encouraging trends in this direction, such as the growing availability of green services, from car repair to house cleaning.

Q: I can see the benefits of green products, but why do green services matter?

A: Green services can make an impact because they often involve greener ways of performing an essential or useful service. A house painter might use greener paints and cleanup methods, or a children's day-care center may use cloth diapers and no chemical air fresheners. Eco-friendly services help popularize green living.

Some services are inherently green, such as shoe repair. It's almost always greener to get something fixed, from a luggage zipper to a computer, rather than buying a new product.

Green products, which may contain less-toxic ingredients or improve energy efficiency, for example, currently have much higher visibility than green services. However, there are increasing concerns that some so-called green products may be superfluous and that encouraging more consumption of "stuff" can have negative environmental effects, even when the products are green.

Q: What are other examples of green services?

A: The Seattle region now boasts greener car washing, carpet cleaning, catering, dentistry, dry cleaning, hair salons, landscaping, pest management, remodeling and taxicabs. The list of green services goes on and on.

Q: How do I find them?

A: When considering a service provider, ask specific questions such as: What types of chemicals do you use? How do you dispose of hazardous wastes? Do you use alternative energy, or practice energy conservation?

Advertising and recommendations can help you get started on your search, but keep in mind that some businesses may be much greener than their competitors but don't make a big deal about it.

Few objective third-party certification systems currently exist for green services, but the regional, government-sponsored EnviroStars program does provide that valuable function for several services including auto repair, dry cleaning and landscaping.

EnviroStars (www.envirostars.org) recognizes businesses that reduce hazardous materials and waste in King, Pierce, Kitsap, Jefferson and Whatcom counties. Businesses must meet qualification criteria and receive an on-site visit to become EnviroStars certified.

Q: Will green services cost more?

A: Sometimes they will. For a home-remodeling contractor, for instance, finding and using greener materials and recycling all the construction waste may take longer and justify a slightly higher price.

But many green services will cost about the same or even less than competitors. Repair services nearly always save money. Getting a pair of shoes resoled might cost \$60 compared with at least twice that for a new pair of shoes.

Q: Are some green services a scam?

A: Green services are rarely a full-blown ripoff, but occasionally businesses use green marketing as an excuse to charge higher prices. In some cases you can save money by choosing a company that doesn't advertise itself as green. Many house cleaners, for example, will be happy to use less-toxic cleaning products by request, even if their company doesn't have "green" in its name.

Q: What's the next frontier for green services?

A: Plenty of opportunities exist for the quirky and innovative, such as the services popularized in Portland that will move you to a new home entirely by bicycle. Also finding a growing niche are services that respond directly to people's health concerns, such as pesticide-free landscaping or nail parlors that don't use toxic chemicals.

By providing more choices for the public and creating new green jobs, green services are poised to take a starring role in an environmental renaissance for the 21st century.

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