

*Prepared by UKCPI and Axiom Communications  
First Published in Brand Label UK  
February 2009*

## **Home Truths about Cleaning Products**

By Jo Jacobius

Consumers are faced with a plethora of choices in the supermarket but, apart from food, perhaps one of the seemingly most diverse areas is that of cleaning products.

When consumers purchase cleaning products, they expect them to clean – of course – and to do so cost-effectively. Some people also expect them to deliver on the environmental front, whilst others probably pay little heed to that. And finally, consumers very sensibly expect these products to deliver the benefits without harming their health. So, cleaning products have four objectives. Do they clean? What's the cost? Are they sustainable and environmentally sound? And, are they safe to use?

There is an abundance of products in this £3bn market which includes; bleaches, laundry detergents, fabric conditioners, soaps, specialised bathroom and kitchen cleaners, lavatory and drain cleaners, polishes and surface cleaners, air fresheners and that's all before you get to the array of speciality products designed to target specific cleaning problems.

Our standards of hygiene and cleanliness are high and we therefore have high expectations about product performance. Keeping our homes, and ourselves, clean and fresh is considered essential not just for a pleasant environment but for well-being. Indeed, the rise in the whole battery of effective cleaning, hygiene and surface care products over the past one hundred years or so has helped reduce childhood mortality and improved health and life expectancy beyond recognition. So why, given this enormous and positive enhancement to our lives do cleaning products, in some quarters, get such a bad name?

Within the food sector, there are all-too-frequent withdrawals and warnings – albeit most of them minor in scale – about food safety issues with regard to specific product lines. Withdrawal of cleaning products is virtually unheard of. Perhaps, because we consume it, food is inherently reliable and viewed as trustworthy, which is why when there is a major food scare it creates such enormous disquiet. Yet, despite their astounding safety record, there is a corresponding suspicion as to the safety of cleaning products. Is this because of the use to which cleaning products are put – poured down lavatories, drains, cleaning messy surfaces and is it the result of too many popular media reports about 'nasties under the sink' that blow the hazards of products or ingredients out of proportion?

Without question, cleaning products sometimes contain active ingredients that in their concentrated form are hazardous and harmful to health. But does that mean any product containing them is also inevitably harmful to health? Not a bit of it: vinegar contains an active ingredient (acetic acid) that Safety Data Sheets describe as 'fatal if ingested', yet it's safe enough to sprinkle on your chips. Making sure that products are safe for their intended use, even when they contain hazardous ingredients, is a legal requirement under the General Product Safety Directive. Of course, some products can be hazardous and should be used with particular care, for example; oven cleaners. Following the manufacturer's instructions for safe use ensures that even these products can be used perfectly safely.

The Industry is also tackling head-on the popular, unscientific perception that all things 'natural' are good whilst all things 'chemical' are suspect. The Association recently published a discussion paper, *Meeting Natural Expectations\**, which pointed out that as everything in the world is composed of the same 90-odd chemical elements, this common expectation that natural products will inevitably tend to be 'safer' is not supported by fact.

A quite different source of concern about cleaning products is popular media reporting which often exaggerates the significance of scientific studies that find 'statistical links' for example between more frequent use of certain kinds of products and various health problems. Statistical links are easy to find, but do they really indicate cause and effect? The Industry examines all such scientific studies very carefully, but last year alone erroneous links were reported between these very safe and carefully researched products and health problems ranging from ear-ache and diarrhoea to diabetes and asthma. In each case, the studies simply did not justify such conclusions,

Dr Andy Williams is the Director General of UK Cleaning Products Industry Association (UKCPI), which represents 95% of the UK cleaning products market including all the major companies operating in this sector. Dr Williams says: "Retailers faced with questions about the safety of cleaning products can reassure their customers that the sector is one of the most highly regulated in Europe. The UK Cleaning Products Industry complies with legislation that ensures human and environmental safety".

"My Members are justifiably proud of the standards they not only meet but exceed on a daily basis. The main cleaning ingredients in all our products must be ultimately biodegradable and above all **the products must be safe when used correctly**. Our Members go to immense lengths to provide consumers with information on the safe use of their products."

Though safety is paramount, it is already very well assured, and the real challenge now is improving environmental sustainability.

“This Industry has been at the forefront of the drive towards sustainability introducing, for instance, smaller pack sizes containing concentrated product with the associated reductions in emissions, minimising the transport impact; and the reduction in packaging materials”, continues Dr Williams.

Marketing messages for mainstream products in this Industry concentrate largely on performance attributes – with ‘green’ aspects, though undoubtedly impressive, taken as a given. Dr Williams explains: “Most of my Members compete in the market-place on efficiency, and because the environmental message is now at the forefront, some people do not realise that **these products not only clean but are also ‘green’ – that is, safe and sustainable.**

“Misconceptions abound and as an Industry we are frequently at pains to point out the truth. The fact is that that we take the environmental aspects of our carefully researched products as a given and because this aspect is not always advertised in the way that some products push the environmental message, it is assumed that it isn’t a factor. **It is time that the Industry and retailers set the record straight.**”

Asked about the major preoccupations facing his Members, Dr Williams says: “The state of the economy; sustainability; human and environmental safety; and regulations are the topics which most exercise our minds at present”.

The UKCPI as an Industry body plays a very active role in ensuring that product content and usage is carefully reviewed and communicated. For example, the Association has played an active role in the Government’s Chemical Regulatory Forum, set up in 2004. It brings together industry bodies, Government and the Regulators to look at the impact of Regulation on the UK Chemicals Industry.

One key area under discussion over the last several months has been the European adoption of the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS) as a regulation on the Classification, Labelling and Packaging of Chemicals (CLP). The aim of CLP, which is likely to come into force late 2008 early 2009 is to harmonise internationally the criteria for classifying chemicals according to their health, environmental and physical hazards and the associated hazard communication requirements for labelling and safety data sheets. As a result of GHS, retailers need to be aware of **changes that will come into force regarding labelling.** The Cleaning Products Industry is not alone, of course, in also having to manage the REACH (Regulation on Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals) Legislation, but is one of the best placed because of all the work done on risk assessing products in the past. The UKCPI has also worked hard to help ensure that regulations surrounding biocides are more workable.

Dr Williams and his team see these three areas as particular achievements for their Association and for other organisations and individuals who have cooperated in the discussions. Commenting on CLP, as one example, Dr Williams says: "Unintended, if well-meaning, consequences suddenly raised the prospect of, for example, unnecessary child resistant closures and tactile warning devices [involving a raised triangle symbol] on an array of products that would have been positively confusing to consumers and could have had the opposite of their intended effect. We pointed to the danger of causing confusion by implying that a rather mild and innocuous product was potentially as hazardous as one which really did need careful handling. This **work on CLP was a great achievement** not just for the Members but for the community at large". Many trade associations have a somewhat passive membership. Not so with UKCPI. Dr Williams concludes: "One of the reasons for our continuing strength and success is not just the fact that we are so strongly representative of the Industry but also because of the extraordinarily active involvement of our Members. The commitment they give is what makes this work".



\*The UKCPI's booklet, *Meeting Natural Expectations*, is available free of charge by emailing [ukcpi@ukcpi.org](mailto:ukcpi@ukcpi.org) It is also downloadable, along with other useful information about the Cleaning Products Industry, from [www.ukcpi.org](http://www.ukcpi.org)