

TABOO to NOW

Katie Barlow, marketing manager with PHS Washrooms, takes a look at the evolution of sanitary disposal over the past 50 years.

‘Women’s things’ and, more importantly, the way we dispose of them at work has come a long way. Since sanitary towels and tampons first became commercially available in the early part of the last century, we’ve undergone a sea change in the ease with which such things are discussed by both sexes, the sophistication of

workplace systems for disposing of them and how these systems are sold to facilities managers.

Yes, in the last 80 to 90 years ‘Sanpro’ has graduated from a rather taboo subject – furtively fielded by largely home-based womenfolk, to spare masculine and their own blushes – into today’s entirely commonplace range of branded products, which men will now happily toss into the supermarket trolley alongside toothpaste and shampoo, on behalf of wives and girlfriends.

The ‘coming out of the closet’ of the whole subject of sanitary protection has moved things forward in the workplace too. In the last few

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years this new-found ease has fuelled a surge in the range and sophistication of commercial sanitary disposal services in the marketplace. New product development now focuses on refinements in ease of use, hygiene, aesthetics and ‘what women want’, and the service itself is concerned with supporting legislative compliance and the specific needs of the purchasing FM.

Let’s take a closer look at how workplace sanitary disposal has reached this point of modern enlightenment.

After the second World War, and throughout

the 1950s, there was a huge increase in the number of women casting off their aprons and entering the workplace. At the time, the accepted practice for disposing of sanitary products was to flush them down the toilet and this led to regular blockages and plumbing expenditure. Some offices started putting their own waste bins in the corner of the washroom, but these were often inadequate, smelly and cleaning staff objected to emptying them. Something needed to be done.

The container exchange service arrives

The early 60s saw the arrival of commercial sanitary disposal in the marketplace. Entrepreneurs George and Alfred Tack, for example, were among the first to provide the modern ‘container exchange service’, and in 1963 registered a new company to specialise in this side of their business; it was called Personnel Hygiene Services (or PHS).

This container exchange service for sanitary disposal was shaped pretty much as it is today.

Providers delivered purpose designed, plastic disposal containers into their customers’

washrooms, and would call again after a suitable interval to collect and replace them with fresh ones. To control odour and kill germs, the containers were charged with a fragranced deodorising chemical and, to further encourage women to use them, the lids were fitted with modesty trays to conceal the deposited contents from view. Once collected, used containers would be returned to the provider’s local depot and be emptied, cleaned and re-charged with deodorant chemical ready for return into service.

The new service still had a bit of evolving to do, however. Firstly, there was the introduction of

large capacity bins which were delivered into the main washroom

area and women were required to exit the cubicle, with their used products wrapped in toilet paper or in paper sanitary bags, and deposit them in full view of other women.

This wasn’t a comfortable situation, and many women continued to flush their products down the toilet and avoid the embarrassment. To really solve the blocked plumbing problem for customers, and keep sales going, providers would have to encourage reliable usage of their disposal containers. So answering this request, slimmer, more discreet, in-cubicle containers were designed.

Another early issue was identifying suitable service intervals, which would work for companies employing different numbers of women. When this failed, problems such as full (therefore non-functioning) bins, whiffily awaiting collection, were off-putting to customers.

Today’s service providers understand the equation better and tend to get it right; this is achieved by working closely with customers at the outset to establish individual needs, providing a bespoke service that works for them and correcting problems immediately (the result of vastly improved emergency response times) when necessary. Basically, the industry knows that it’s long term future depends on securing long term, successful relationships with customers, based on trust and mutual respect

The automation of container washing is another change that’s brought about vast improvements

in health & safety for both suppliers’ cleaning staff and their customers, compared to way back. Decades ago, teams of cleaners would work all day to empty, wash and recharge sanitary disposal containers with deodorising chemical. Not the nicest of jobs, and not the safest considering the range of non-sanitary items (including hypodermic syringes) that occasionally turned up in them.

Automated washing equipment has revolutionised the process by reducing manual contact, and using higher temperatures and purpose designed cleaning agents, resulting in much better sanitisation of containers before they’re returned to the customers’ premises.

To burn, or not to burn?

A hot debate, which has raged pretty much continuously over the years, is that of whether it’s preferable, ultimately, to landfill or incinerate the sanitary waste that providers collect from their customers’ businesses (being the viable options currently available for high volume disposal).

The choice, at any given time, hinges on how sanitary waste is officially classified. In December 2006, the Department Of Health’s ‘Health Technical Memorandum 07-01: Safe management of healthcare waste’ was released, which classifies sanitary waste as ‘offensive waste’, rather than hazardous. The Memorandum’s stated ‘best practice’ is that offensive waste should be disposed of by deep landfill, rather than by incineration.

Responsible service providers build guidelines like these into policy and, in some cases, go one further. PHS Washrooms, for example, sends its

sanitary waste to 'energy from waste' landfill sites (which it considers a more sustainable option than incineration) and supports the expansion of such facilities across the UK. The company will incinerate sanitary waste only when a customer specifically requests it, and incinerates other, higher-risk categories of waste – clinical waste, for example – for health & safety reasons.

Raising standards, boosting the industry

In the last four decades the sanitary disposal market continued to grow, though it was still something of a hard sell – viewed by buyers as an option rather than a necessity – and there was considerable variation in the quality of provision. Then, in the early 1990s, new laws emerged, which would change that uncertainty forever. These acted to enforce both organisational provision of sanitary disposal (it became mandatory) and also the adoption of compliant, 'best practice' methods.

The main law controlling the quality of container exchange services for sanitary disposal is the Environmental Protection Act 1990 – in particular Section 34, its 'Duty of care' relating to waste disposal. For the first time, waste producers had a legal responsibility to ensure correct management of their waste, at every stage in its processing. So organisations became liable for what disposal contractors did with their sanitary waste, even after it had left their premises; they couldn't just 'wipe their hands of it' when it had gone, so to speak!

This was a big deal, and it impacted on both buyers and providers of sanitary disposal services. Buyers now had to obtain documented proof of compliance from their waste disposal suppliers, and to monitor and verify good practice on an ongoing basis. Suppliers were forced to 'tighten up their acts' or get out – perfecting processes, licensing their bin cleaning depots (which assumed the status of Waste Transfer Stations) and providing Waste Transfer Notes to customers, amongst many other things.

There was more to come: In 1992, the approved code of practice for Regulation 21 of the Workplace (*Health, Safety and Welfare*)

Regulations would make effective washroom sanitary disposal provision a necessity, advising that: "In the case of water closets used by women, suitable means should be provided for the



disposal of sanitary dressings".

The gravy train was in, for the sanitary disposal market.

Environmental campaigns

The next big push for the sanitary disposal industry gathered force in the 1990s, forged its way into the new millennium and continues to this day – namely a surge in public, government and media concern over the environment.

A number of campaigns emerged that drew public attention to the unacceptability of Sewage Related Debris (including used sanitary towels and tampons) ending up on British beaches and riverbanks. Perhaps the most prominent of these was the national 'Bag It and Bin It' campaign, which worked to reduce this kind of pollution by dissuading people from flushing inappropriate items down the toilet. "Bag it and bin it; don't flush it", they told us.

Bag It and Bin It came about following discussions between South West Water, the Marine Conservation Society, Surfers against Sewage and other concerned parties. They fought tirelessly to reduce the problem of inappropriately toilet-flushed items blocking the

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filter screens in sewage treatment plants, and then escaping from overflow pipes during heavy rainfall. And this is more of an issue than you might think; in 2003 the Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch Campaign collected over 21,000 items of SRD, amounting to an average of 160 items per KM of coastline.

The upshot was, that in the great feminine consciousness, it was no longer OK to flush sanitary items down the toilet at home, or at work. And for facilities managers, legally compliant and environmentally responsible methods for disposing of sanitary items in toilet cubicles have now become as much of a washroom necessity as soap dispensers and hand drying equipment.

Anyway, the sanitary disposal industry threw another log on the fire.

Now that legislative compliance may be taken as a 'given' with the majority of container exchange service suppliers current industry developments tend towards refining product and service design, to better suit the needs of FMs and the modern women they're catering for.

Suppliers are actively researching women's thoughts

and feelings about washroom sanitary disposal, and they're building the results into some long awaited design improvements. Improvements like pedal-operation, to make the disposal process more hygienic.

What women want

In the early part of 2008, PHS Washrooms ran a series of women's focus groups, to gauge the thoughts and feelings of sanitary disposal service users about container design. From these meetings, it emerged that:

- Women didn't particularly like touching SDUs on hygiene grounds, and were in favour of 'no touch' automatic or pedal-operated models;
- They often felt that 'no touch' containers weren't that user-friendly. Foot pedals were often hard to reach or too recessed to see clearly;
- They thought they were a bit dull and utilitarian-looking, and should be available in a wider range of colours and designs.

PHS took these comments into account when developing its Eclipse sanitary disposal unit. It features SteriTouch 'silver technology' antibacterial protection built into the lid and flaps, and charged with EnviroSan Active (*the only*

container germicide with 99.99% bactericidal efficacy which is

also British Standard certified to both BS 1276 and BS 13727).

What's next?

Because it's simple and because it works, the basic container exchange service for workplace sanitary disposal has retained its present structure for the past 40-50 years, experiencing refinements and modifications rather than radical departures from form.

But nothing in this life is set in stone! Sanitary disposal will last as long as there is 'sanitary' to dispose of, and it's not inconceivable that R&D may lead to a new generation of women's sanitary products which are entirely water-closet soluble and therefore of no threat to plumbing or the environment.

For now though, service providers who survive and prosper into the future will be the ones who talk to their customers (in more than just sales transactions) and who both anticipate and react quickly to changes in their needs, working priorities and desires.

They'll be the providers who respond the fastest to moves in legislation, the marketplace and public mood and bias. In short, it's those suppliers who are ready for change that will play a part in the future of the sanitary disposal industry (*and it's those that aren't, that won't*).