



10 tips on USGBC's new volume program

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For large-scale retailers seeking U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) LEED certification for their brick and mortar locations, being "green" has become a little easier, according to experts at Gruskin Group, an integrated retail design firm.

"Until recently, many organizations committed to going 'green' faced a costly and repetitive submission process to attain LEED certification for their property. To address this, the USGBC developed the LEED Volume Program, which allows companies that have prototypical buildings with similar designs to apply for LEED certification in bulk," said Kenneth Gruskin, AIA, principal and founder of Gruskin Group. "This can save many kinds of businesses significant time and money over the current, individualized process."

To help retailers understand how the Volume Program works and whether they can or should take advantage of it, Gruskin offers the following tips:

1. Determine whether the project lends itself to the Volume Program: Most chain-type facilities that utilize a standard building or facility design, such as retailers, restaurants, convenience stores, banks and gas stations, are prime candidates.
2. Know how the program works and how it differs from the current process: Instead of submitting stores individually, the Volume Program allows retailers to submit stores in batches, which precludes repetitive registration and review costs. This simplifies the submission process, as most locations will be pre-certified within their prototype. Retailers can also have the commissioning process carried out by their own quality control or construction management teams rather than their LEED and design consultants. Individual facilities, however, would be subject to spot checks by USGBC inspectors.
3. Know what is in a LEED Prototype Document: Since the USGBC requires technical and managerial uniformity across the organization's portfolio, retailers need to prepare a LEED prototype document that represents the baseline standard, including a detailed description of quality-control processes and employee training curricula, as well as a threshold range for mechanical units, approved manufacturers and typical installation requirements.
4. Ensure that adapting to the new standards will not alter the stores' brand and customer experience: If building a "green" store in some way undermines the brand or customer experience, then only "green" elements that do not cause negative impacts should be included --even if it means a store cannot ultimately be LEED certified or included in the Volume Program.
5. Maintain uniformity: Lack of uniformity could call into question all of the stores certified under the Volume Program and possibly lead to fines or a suspension of the prototype's LEED certification.
6. Build around the company's inherent culture and existing processes: The design team should take existing standard procedures and shift them towards the LEED certification criteria, rather than try to build them from scratch.

7. Incorporate easily reproducible "green" features into the prototype design: Lighting, plumbing, materials and furnishings, for example, can be reproduced easily and consistently over a broad range of localities, while more elaborate systems like green roofs, day-lighting strategies, rainwater systems and on-site power generation may require more consideration regarding their feasibility and lifecycle costs.

8. Set performance criteria for site-specific items: The prototype design should establish criteria for site-specific items such as mechanical systems and exterior/site elements to ensure the action plan meets the retailer's quality-control and management requirements, as well as LEED standards.

9. Establish one architecture firm as the central LEED contact: Since chains typically use local architects, engineers and vendors in different regions, it is important to have one firm maintain the prototype specifications and drawings to ensure consistency, while laying out strong guidelines in both the prototype set and the quality control/education plan to maintain a high level of uniformity.

10. Create a plan and stick to it: As with any new, complex endeavor, a period of trial and error is expected. Work through the initial hiccups and avoid unnecessary costs by identifying project goals early and establishing a LEED team and "captain" at the onset of the project. Then, develop and stick to a highly-integrated and well-orchestrated plan.

"While the new USGBC Volume Program may be the most cost-effective, efficient approach to integrating sustainability into an existing retail portfolio, being 'green' is not an end unto itself," noted Gruskin. "The most crucial step is to determine whether it makes sense for your store prototype to be modified to fit into the USGBC LEED Volume Program requirements. If it is, then now is a great time for retailers to take charge of the 'green' ambitions and channel them through the new Volume Program."

About Gruskin Group

Gruskin Group is an integrated design firm that builds unified brand experiences through architecture, brand development, visual communications, web/interactive, industrial design, interior design, strategic consulting, and sustainable design.

Ranked by DDi magazine as one of the top 20 retail design firms in the U.S., as well as one of New Jersey's top architecture firms by NJBiz, Gruskin Group was named to the Inc. 5000 in 2009 and 2010. The firm's and its professionals' award-winning work has been recognized by AIA, the Retail Design Institute, New York Ad Club, New Jersey Ad Club, ASID, Graphis, and the Association of Graphic Communications. For additional information, visit www.gruskingroup.com.

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