

Green at Work: Green Your Business in 4 Steps

The “green” movement is gaining more momentum than ever. Increasing numbers of consumers and businesses are placing more emphasis on green. The government has major green buying initiatives and massive budgeted dollars to back them up. Green can improve company sales and profitability. For example, Baxter International recently announced that their green initiatives yielded \$11.9 Million in environmental savings and income. So if you are new to green and wondering what it is all about and how to get there – here are some basic steps and ideas to get started...

Step 1: Do Your Green Homework

Start your green journey by learning the key terminology and concepts regarding sustainable business practices. At a very high level, the goal of going green is to become an environmentally sustainable business. So just what is a sustainable business?

A sustainable business is an enterprise that has no negative impact on the global or local environment, community, society, or economy—a business that strives to meet the triple bottom line of people, planet and profit. A sustainable business is any organization that participates in environmentally-friendly or green activities to ensure that all processes, products, and manufacturing activities adequately address current environmental concerns while maintaining a profit. In other words, it is a business that “meets the needs of the present world without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs.”(1) A major initiative of sustainable businesses is to eliminate or decrease the impact made on the environment by harmful chemicals, materials, and waste generated by processes to manufacture products and services. The impact of such human activities in terms of the amount of greenhouse gases produced can be measured in units of carbon dioxide and is referred to as the carbon footprint. The carbon footprint concept branched off from ecological footprint analysis, which examines the ecological capacity required to support the consumption of products.

One of the most common examples of sustainable business initiatives is the act of going paperless. On a higher level, sustainable business practices can include reviewing processes in order to eliminate or recycle waste, making all products recyclable, and eliminating the use of nonrenewable resources via alternatives energies. Sustainable businesses also look at inputs to determine what products are harmful to the environment and try to find green alternatives that can function at the same or a better level and, preferably, at a lower cost. Company leaders also take into account the life cycle costs for inputs of items purchased. Input costs must be considered in regards to regulations, energy use, storage, and disposal. (2)

While a sustainable business is the end game, there are all levels of green between where you are at now and the finish line. There are lots of websites with information like this document as well as books available to help build a fundamental knowledge of green business principals. As you become more informed, formulate what level of green you want to attain and start to build a plan...

Case Study:

ZING Enterprises, LLC (www.ZingGreenProducts.com), a new business enterprise in 2007, was formed to market green products like information and education materials (i.e. signs, posters, signs & posters kits) under the trademark Green@Work. The products are unique in that they are designed to communicate and educate employees on green processes and behaviors through signs and posters. The company's commitment to green runs deeper than that. The signs and poster themselves are made out of high post-consumer recycled plastic, the website is powered by wind (www.hostgator.com), the corrugated packaging is 100% PCW (www.salazarpackaging.com), a web-based fax system is used so no faxes are printed unless if absolutely needed (www.greenfax.com), business cards/letterhead/envelopes are eco-friendly, the primary sales channel is through a distributor with major green initiatives (www.grainger.com) and the list goes on. ZING is an example of how a company can promote green and also integrate green in many different ways throughout the business processes.

Step 2: Develop a Green Plan

Once you have done your homework, layout a game plan on where you want to start greening the business. Developing a green Mission, Vision and Values statement can help frame the scope of the plan. Try to integrate green into the business plan. You will need to review each process and procedure in your business. This includes the entire product lifecycle, including product selection, purchasing, use, disposal, and your impact on the environment. Identify both short term and long term activities that you want to implement. Prioritize them and put together a project plan(s) to get them done. When you have an idea where you are going, start with simple tactics and try for quick victories – especially efforts that can add to the bottom line. Cost savings have a way of creating support for green activities and can help fund green processes that require investments. Green processes don't have to cost a lot or anything. Here are 8 ideas for a greener office or the business in general that can cost little to implement but can add to the bottom line and improve your business's sustainability:

1. Print/Copy two-sided. What would be the impact to your company's bottom line if paper consumption was cut in half?
2. Print less/Review documents on screen/Route documents electronically
3. Reuse scrap paper, file folders, routing envelopes
4. Get in the habit of turning off the lights for areas not in use (conference rooms, desks, storage rooms, bathrooms)
5. Put your computer into "sleep" mode or shut them off when you are in meetings, at lunch or leaving for the day.
6. Make sure that water taps are completely off when you are done using them. Water is not free...
7. Take the stairs versus the elevator, if applicable. It is good for you and saves electricity.
8. Remove your name from unwanted mailing lists. How much time is spent sorting and handling unwanted mail?

Key Green Process Categories

There are key categories of green processes that can be evaluated when looking at improving the environmental sustainability of the business. Some of the primary ones are as follows:

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

Reduce, Reuse and Recycle, also known as the three R's, is commonly represented by a logo with three rotating arrows. To improve the business's sustainability, you must Reduce consumption and waste, Reuse when possible, and Recycle everything you can.

Reduce - Look for ways to reduce consumption of natural resources and ways to eliminate waste, including conserving energy, reducing water consumption, and reducing waste. Here are 18 Reduce ideas:

1. Replace incandescent bulbs with Compact Fluorescent Lights (CFLs)
2. Install sensors to turn off lights in unoccupied rooms
3. Install dimming controls for lighting systems
4. Replace older exit signage with newer LED versions
5. Buy in bulk or buy items with reduced / recyclable packaging
6. Promote car pooling and public transportation
7. Install low-flush or waterless toilets and water restrictors on faucets
8. Install filters on water taps to discourage bottled water
9. Improve Landscaping – Repair broken sprinkler heads, adjust timers, install a drip system, eliminate over watering and runoff, plant drought resistant plants, use mulch to reduce evaporation
10. Clean floors with microfiber mops to reduce water usage
11. Install tankless water heaters
12. Avoid using disposable products, paper plates, plastic utensils, napkins, paper towels and cups
13. Choose longer lasting products
14. Buy energy efficient equipment
15. Replace older mercury thermostats with programmable thermostats
16. Purchase locally when possible
17. Change the chemicals you purchase to ones that have lower impact on the environment, including cleaning supplies, paint, pest control, fertilizer, etc
18. Leverage e-mail, telephone, voice mail, forums, blogs, and online advertising technologies to help promote your business

Reuse – Look at changing your existing methods and replacing disposable items with reusable alternatives. Evaluate purchasing durable items like filing cabinets used. Here are 6 Reuse ideas:

1. Purchase reusable products such as rechargeable batteries, washable towels
2. Save packing material you receive and reuse for shipping
3. Use white boards and e-mail to replace sticky notes
4. Refill ink cartridges
5. Provide reusable mugs and utensils in the break/lunch room
6. If you can't reuse an item, sell it or donate it so someone else gets use out of it

Recycle - Go through all processes methodically to see if everything that can be recycled is being recycled. Recycling involves taking items that are at the end of their useful life and giving them to a recycler who can turn them into raw material to make something else. Review all waste products to see if anything additional can be recycled or can be eliminated or replaced with recyclable alternatives. Here are 7 Recycle ideas:

1. Provide recycling containers in all work areas
2. Recycle toner cartridges and buy refilled toner cartridges
3. Recycle the basics like paper, cardboard, plastics, cans, bottles, glass but also look at less common materials like stretch wrap, steel and plastic banding, etc
4. Recycle e-Waste* – Televisions, Cellular Phones, Computers, Consumer Electronics
5. Recycle used fluorescent lamps, ballasts and batteries
6. Recycle Paint – Can be recycled by reprocessing or reblending
7. Choose to buy recycled and recyclable products

Green Purchasing

Green purchasing involves looking at all acquired materials, products and services and looking for greener options. There is a massive array of options to buy greener. Everything from business cards to office or janitorial supplies and light bulbs to web hosting services have greener options. Here are 8 Green Purchasing ideas:

1. Buy from local and/or certified green businesses
2. Buy products that are recycled (post-consumer is best), recyclable, bio-based, rapidly renewable, reusable, non-toxic or energy efficient rated (i.e. ENERGY STAR)
3. For items you use a lot of, buy in bulk.
4. For items you use infrequently, buy only what you need
5. Send electronic bills or e-mail .PDF invoices to your clients instead of sending printed copies in the mail.

6. Consider a web-based fax system where faxes can be printed out only if necessary.
7. Look at buying higher quality durable products that last longer than lower cost versions that will end up being disposed of sooner.
8. Look for green power and renewable energy sources

Comply with Environmental Regulations

Compliance is not only good for the environment, but protects your business from law suits and fines. Review and validate compliance to federal, state and local regulations regarding health, fire, air quality, waste handling and disposal, and wastewater/storm drains. Here are 4 Environmental Regulation ideas:

1. Review the MSDS sheets for the chemicals being used in the facility. Are you purchasing harmful/toxic items for use in your business? Are there greener options? Healthier options?
2. Audit the waste going out of the building. Verify that no hazardous waste is going down the drain or into the trash dumpster.
3. Do regular air quality monitoring to validate no toxins or irritants are present.
4. Post eco-signage to continuously educate and remind employees to be safer and greener.

Step 3: Measure Results

It has been said that “only those things that get measured can be managed.” This applies to implementing a green program. Whether you are measuring your high level “carbon footprint” or specific metrics involving electrical use, water conservation, paper usage reduction, etc – make sure to set goals, communicate progress and celebrate successes. Put up green scoreboards that provide a very visual reminder of the initiatives and shows gains towards green goals. Make the measurements relevant to those involved. For example, “trees saved” may be more relevant than pounds of paper saved.

Step 4: Green Education and Evangelism

Going green in business is a continuous process – not an event. It is important that everyone in the business understands this and embraces it. Green education and reinforcement has to be a part of the go green effort. Along with keeping employees engaged with green, you should be educating and introducing green practices to customers, other businesses and the community. Get involved - spread the word, trade ideas, join green associations, share your knowledge and experience with others. Make sure to market your green efforts through your website, e-mails or whatever channel you are using.

In Closing

Remember, transitioning a business to be greener is a journey. You need to start by taking the first step. It is okay to start out small and gradually build momentum to get through all four steps. Going green doesn't have to be about huge initiatives. Have fun along the way. Get a lot of people involved. Doing the right thing for the planet and the business feels good – enjoy it. Good luck on your green journey!

Additional information for this article came from web sites of the following sources: 1. United Nations "Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development." General Assembly Resolution 42/187, 2. Wikipedia "Sustainable Business", www.business.gov "Green Guide for New Businesses", www.startupnation.com "9 Steps to Greening Your Business", www.supplylink.com "40 Ways to Green Your Business"

Related Links:

www.grainger.com/green

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In addition to working for a "green" company, Joel Wright has spent the last 20 years in various manufacturing and marketing roles in the industrial/commercial market space. Also, he has MBAs in both Marketing and Management from the University of Wisconsin - Whitewater.