

Consumers Prefer Sustainable Brands

A 5-Step Plan with Benefits

BY BRYCE GERRITSEN

During a recent visit to a recommended restaurant, I was impressed. The food was delicious; the vegetables were fresh, and the portions were large. The restaurant's reputation was well earned. When finished I took my eating utensils to the nearest receptacles for recycling. There were no recycling containers, just one overworked waste bin. I gazed at the mountain of aluminum bowls, plastic flatware, and food waste. Drawing on my childhood experience with the balancing game of Jenga, I strategized how to best dispose my dishes when another patron suddenly put his plate on top. The mountain came tumbling down.

I asked an employee why I didn't see any recycling or composting bins. He responded with a shrug. I pressed him even further by asking if his employer had a sustainability plan. "A what plan?" he asked.

I repeated myself, "A sustainability plan. You know, a plan to conserve resources, decrease energy use, and reduce waste, like through recycling?" His look got more confused. It was obvious that no one had ever used that word around him.

As a sustainability professional, I care more about sustainability than the typical restaurant-goer. However, research shows that consumers are exhibiting a preference for sustainable brands at an increasing rate. Large companies have tuned into this market trend. According to a 2011 McKinsey survey, 76% of CEOs consider that strong sustainability performance contributes positively to their business in the long term.

Consumer preference is just one reason that businesses are dedicating resources to sustainability. Businesses are looking at their ap-

proach to climate change, evaluating their internal and supply chain emissions, and seeking resiliency to these changes through planning. Uncertainty in prices of constrained resources like energy, food, and water translate into risk. Strategies to reduce dependency on these resources mean lower risks.

With so many benefits, it's hard to understand why sustainability isn't already integrated into the business-as-usual model for every organization. Here are some steps to get you started making your business more sustainable:

Measure Your Vitals

In a previous job in intensive care, each patient's vitals were taken upon admission. We measured heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, temperature, hemoglobin count, and urine output.

Like a patient, your business has moving pieces, inputs and outputs, and many parts working for the benefit of the whole. You want to measure your business's vitals—establish baselines—by looking at past utility bills, energy audits, employee and customer surveys, waste data, etc. You may need to be creative in gathering this data. One of my clients even paid an employee to observe a waste and recycling bin for several hours and survey each person to find out why they chose a certain receptacle.

Prioritize

Once you have established your baselines, you can identify the largest users of energy, material, and resources. Take some time to prioritize this list. Whether you use "1, 2, 3" or even a color-ranking system, rank your biggest resource users. Use this list to discuss solutions so that your planning time is used most effectively.

Test Solutions

Rethink processes, brainstorm solutions, and listen to every idea. Involve as many stakeholders in the discussion as possible. Many times the best solutions come from the people most affected by the change in policy or practice.

Invest time in staying on top of trending technologies and practices. Collaborate with others in your area, within your industry and

without. I recently contracted as a sustainability coach for REV, a San Francisco company that leads peer learning "Sustainability Circles." I was amazed by the collaborative relationships created between completely different businesses, built around sustainable solutions.

Once you have a list of possible solutions, choose a few to implement on a small scale. If they don't work, tweak them and test again. If they still don't work, move on to the next idea. If they do work, move on to the next step.

Double Down

Once you have proven a solution, expand the change to the whole organization. You may decide that rolling the change out in steps is more appropriate for your particular business, or you may make the change all at once. Each organization is different and requires different approaches to get stakeholders on board. Scaling successful initiatives is where most fiscal rewards are reaped.

Share Your Vision

Now that sustainability is a priority, it should be communicated to all stakeholders. Consider revising your mission statement to incorporate sustainability. Include it in new-hire and employee training materials. Integrate it into your brand through marketing. Consumers prefer giving their business to a company engaged in sustainability. Communicating your initiatives will gain stakeholder buy-in, while communicating your successes will gain their pride and loyalty.

Incorporating sustainability into your business can be daunting. It can be difficult for an organization to dedicate the personnel and fiscal resources necessary to

get started. Keep the long-term vision in sight. Most medium to large organizations I have worked with project annual savings from sustainability in the hundreds of thousands of dollars—more than enough to justify the resources to hire in-house or external help. 🐾



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