

TEXTILE SERVICES

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Making Green from Green

Companies that focus on the environment may enter the 'Green Promised Land' of sustainability



By Bruce Hodes

Let's start this article with a disclaimer: I don't consider myself an expert in business sustainability. However, I probably know enough to be dangerous.

In my view, sustainability means your business is conducted in such a way that it can exist without being environmentally destructive. At the very least, environmental neutrality is what your company wants to achieve. An even better aspiration is to positively impact the environment.

There are dozens, hundreds of ideas, large and small, that organizations can implement to positively impact the environment. Additionally, your company can make money as you create a green reason for customers to buy from your organization. When real dollars can be made from environmentalism, then environmentalism is good for you and good for business. This notion epitomizes the goal of "making green from green."

THE FIELD IS YOURS TO TAKE

Two of our clients have earned the position of being the environmental leaders in their industries. They were not particularly looking

for this distinction; it was thrust upon them by the inertia of their industry and competition. It helped that they were proactive and up to date with the best environmental practices.

When one of these clients, an asphalt-contracting company, modernized its existing facility, the organization paved the parking lot with water-permeable asphalt. Because water runs through the pavement, there is no need for drainage, sewers or a retention pond. With permeable asphalt, no additional land is needed for runoff and drainage from the parking lot. Additionally, the company doesn't need to deal with pollutants that collect in retention pond water. Adding permeable asphalt was only one of the changes that contributed

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to the company becoming certified by LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). This third-party affirmation of environmental quality reinforced this company's green credentials.

Now, if you only consider what it costs to pave the parking lot with water-permeable asphalt, in the short term it's more expensive to pave with this material. However, when you factor in that you no longer have to build a retention pond

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and incorporate a complicated drainage system, paving this way is less expensive in the long run. In addition, the project comes without the environmental damage and complications that come from building a retention pond and other supportive drainage.

Additionally, this asphalt company has given numerous presentations to the Illinois Tollway Authority and recently won a project because of its knowledge and expertise on permeable and green-asphalt mixes.

Will municipalities and counties follow the same lead? Is state and federal spending friendly to this kind of thought? The answer to these questions is "yes." It's no longer a question of "if." It is now simply a question of when. The concept of making green from green is coming into its own.

The company modernized its facility in the middle of Chicago's west side... The benefits included saving 50,000 therms of natural gas, 5.5 million gallons of water, 3,000 gallons of chemicals and lower operating costs.

Another client of mine that embraces sustainability provides commercial and industrial laundry services. The company modernized its facility in the middle of Chicago's west side. This state-of-the-art plant uses recycled water in its cleaning process. Heat from the washers is captured and used to clean clothes, and nonpolluting chemicals are used by the electrically efficient washers. The benefits included saving 50,000 therms of natural gas, 5.5 million gallons of water, 3,000 gallons of chemicals and lower operating costs. This plant is an example of a green solution.

The new plant gives the organization environmental leadership status. Lots of prospective customers have been on plant tours, and its positive environmental impact on Chicago is a selling point. In fact, an entire marketing campaign highlights this sustainable direction. These efforts have improved customer relationships and contribute to the bottom line.

WHAT'S THE FUTURE WORTH TO YOU?

The million-dollar question is this: What, from a business perspective, is being green worth? Will customers be attracted to environmentalism and pay for it?

I have watched leadership groups gasp in horror at the thought of being seen as "tree huggers." As a recovering hippie who listens to Rush Limbaugh, I don't think being a tree hugger is such a bad thing. But for some executives, this connotation apparently carries horrific implications—might they be turning into ... hippies? Is it the possibility of taking drugs and wearing tie-dyed shirts that scares them? Is it that they think listening to the Grateful Dead is mandatory?

In fact, this is a generational issue. Executives in their 50s and 60s are environmentally sympathetic; we all want fresh air and clean water. However, this age group tends to have parameters around how far they will allow their companies to go toward sustainability. Meanwhile, employees in their 20s and 30s—whom I will affectionately call "Enviro-Fanatics"—find great excitement in environmental development. They are passionate about moving sustainability initiatives forward and tend to be extremely motivated by making a difference. This generation perceives that it has more at stake in the environment and the future.

If an organization goes in this sustainability direction, it can build employee loyalty as well as public goodwill. If you are looking at whom to put in charge of researching environmental initiatives, it's the younger group. They will find the options and possibilities. The older set of business managers and executives will think it through and implement, while the younger set will do the passionate heavy lifting. Both will lead the business into the green Promised Land.

Again, as sustainability becomes more acceptable, being committed to it also becomes more acceptable. Add in that sustainability can be a differentiator for your products and services and allow you to sell more, and you have a really interesting opportunity.

YOU LOOK GOOD IN GREEN

I strongly encourage your organization to adopt a direction toward sustainability. This is not a political statement, but one that reflects the reality of the times. Of course, there needs to be authenticity. Just saying you are sustainable by your attempts to recycle is not sufficient. If there is not sincerity in the actions your company takes, customers will see this for what it is: an attempt to take advantage of the latest fad. What's more, exaggerated claims may generate problems with the Federal Trade Commission. Last year, this agency issued an updated edition of its Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims. Commonly known as the "Green Guides," this publication details what types of claims businesses should avoid. The problem is that open-ended claims

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of environmental benefits often are difficult for consumers to understand. They're even harder for companies to substantiate. Check with your legal counsel, if you're concerned that any environmental claims you make might be problematic.

But by no means should you let the possibility of green marketing missteps deter you from pursuing environmentally friendly operations. This is a new direction for mainstream businesses. There will be mistakes and false starts. The payoff for attempting to create a net zero environmental impact is worth it.

For example, a client of ours recently installed solar panels on its roof. The electricity generated will not be much—maybe enough to power their offices. They are in the Midwest, after all, which is known for long overcast winters. These solar panels, however, look impressive and have great buzz value. Supporting the solar industry also creates a feel-good value for the company. Five years ago, solar panels weren't recommended for Chicago, but now, after dramatic improvements

in price and function, they make sense. The panels will pay for themselves in 10 years.

Bottom line? Now is a great time to take your sustainability efforts to the next level. Make this your "green" year. Consider your options in processing, packaging and recycling products. Think about the savings you can achieve from operating a green facility. Take time to research government grants and any funding that may be available for sustainability initiatives. Look to see where, by cutting costs and differentiating your products, you can make green from green. When your customers see the value that your environmental actions have for them and their world, they will embrace your company with renewed vigor.

Green on! TS

Bruce Hodes and his company, CMI, Oak Park, IL, help companies of all sizes achieve growth by developing executive leadership teams, business leaders and executives into powerful performers. Contact him at bhodes@cmiteamwork.com, 800.883.7995, www.cmiteamwork.com.

Moving Forward, cont.

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Table 2. TRSA Contacts from the New England Food Show, March 10-12, Boston

45	leads identified; they work with TRSA member companies 12 member companies total
28	leads identified; they work with nonmember companies 13 nonmember companies total
21	no-programmers
13	QPLs
5	startups
15	programmers who couldn't identify their service provider
127	TOTAL CONTACTS

After the show, we sent members the names and business locations of their customers that we spoke with, as well as prospects of the four types described in the previous paragraph.

FINE-TUNING INTELLIGENCE GATHERING

Not all of our exhibits or promotions will result in such quantified, pleasing productivity. The Boston show was for

restaurateurs, our industry's biggest market. Thus, we noted customers and prospects for every market segment in our business, even industrial launderers. In fact, most of our fellow exhibitors (suppliers to the restaurant industry) were the types of manufacturers and service providers who need uniforms and dust control. Some of them made it onto our list of leads as well.

Plus, this show was in a metropolitan area with one of the highest concentrations of locally and regionally based major linen suppliers. Their customers were well represented among our booth visitors.

But there are prospects for our members in every market in every city and town. We have plenty of ways to communicate with these buyers. Rest assured that we will find the right means to cull the best intelligence available from them to build TRSA members' market share. **TS**

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