

Small Business and Sustainability

By Scott Rossborough

Over the past year we have all been hearing more about the importance of sustainability. We are told that sustainability is good for business and the planet, and that it is the responsibility of every business to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. So it is no surprise that an increasing number of our clients have been asking for help in determining what role sustainability can and should play in their business, and how they can begin to achieve sustainability on a cost-effective basis.

We have been taking a closer look at what sustainability means for small business. We have scanned the press, scoured the Internet and spoken with numerous business influencers and owners. Here is what we have learned.

Sustainability is the capacity to endure. Achieving sustainability is an ongoing journey (vs. a destination), which requires long-term commitment.

The two primary flavors of sustainability are economic and environmental. Social progress is also sometimes mentioned as a sustainability focal area. For companies this often translates into Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). However, it is not clear to us that internal CSR business practices such as “management transparency” and “employee involvement” are essential for a company to endure, so we have set CSR aside for another day.

Environmental sustainability is garnering all the press. Organizations of all sizes have embraced environmental sustainability. However, while every step on the journey of sustainability helps, it is large companies (and large organizations such as governments, hospitals and educational institutions) that are having the greatest impact and accruing the greatest benefit from their commitment to sustainability.

The large companies that are investing most heavily in sustainability and publicizing their accomplishments are positively impacting their bottom line. Their sales have increased and they have been accumulating cash. These large companies are investing in reducing energy consumption, conserving water and improving efficiency in the elimination of waste of which reduces their cost of doing business. And each company’s brand image is enhanced by the goodwill associated with being “green.”

Small businesses are more focused on economic sustainability. Unlike many large companies, most small businesses are still mired in the recession. They lack the access to credit and the global markets that are buoying many large companies. Small businesses continue to attempt to reduce costs by cutting staff and capacity,



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just so they can survive. In fact, the National Federation of Independent Businesses' Small Business Optimism Index is below where it was in the depths of the early 1990s recession, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Even so, many small businesses are also looking for cost-effective ways to adopt environmentally sustainable business practices. The goal is for the benefits to accrue to both the bottom line and the environment. This is no easy task.

While the opportunity to successfully implement sustainable business practices varies widely by company, the exploration process is the same. There are organizations that will help small businesses benchmark their overall environmental sustainability efforts against a norm at no charge (check out www.bcorporation.net) At Trinity we recommend a focused and customized process, which results in clear goals and action plans that produce measureable and leverageable results.

- 1. DEFINE what sustainability means to you.** Wikipedia devotes 28 pages to "sustainability."
- 2. BENCHMARK the current status of your sustainability efforts.** What have you been doing to promote economic and environmental sustainability?
- 3. IDENTIFY the desired role of sustainability in your business going forward.** What specifically would you like to accomplish and over what period of time?
- 4. CREATE milestones that will define success.** Link ongoing investment to achievement of those milestones.
- 5. LEVERAGE your sustainability efforts.** Enhance your brand/company images with external/internal constituencies by implementing targeted messaging strategies.

At Trinity Marketing we love helping clients think through what sustainability can mean to them and how their business can benefit from a commitment to both economic and environmental sustainability. We offer research, analysis and insights that are specifically geared to meet the needs and budgets of emerging, small and mid-sized businesses. And we have deep experience in developing messaging strategies and communications plans that will deliver a measurable ROI.

Please call us at 617.292.7300 to talk about your sustainability challenges and opportunities.