

The Business of Going Green: Simple Strategies for Jumpstarting Change

by Dan Logan

Sustainablebusiness.com defines green business as “businesses that contribute to an equitable and ecologically sustainable economy.”

The New Year is finally here and we can all breathe a sigh of relief for making it through the rollercoaster that was 2008. As we look further into 2009 it's obvious that it will be a year marked with significant positive change. New leadership for the country. A gradual recovery from the economic crisis. And perhaps most importantly, new operational business practices aimed at creating a positive, sustainable environment.

Reducing energy costs and setting environmentally responsible standards are two of Obama's top priorities as he assumes the role of President. These priorities will also extend to businesses as they have come to realize that green initiatives are a real and permanent part of the corporate landscape. We will see this in varying degrees not only in the automobile industry but also in universities, banks and retailers alike. In some cases, companies may go so far as to include green principles in their overall mission and value proposition, while others may simply integrate some of the fundamentals into their business operations and corporate culture.

The Genzyme Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts is considered to be one of the most environmentally responsible buildings in America. Earning the highest possible rating from the U.S. Green Building Council, it sets the standard for efficiency through its extensive use of natural light and innovative heating and plumbing systems. But many companies won't be able to go to such extremes to transform their workspaces. What are some simple strategies we could implement to reduce negative impact? Is there really a competitive advantage to be gained from a green strategy? And how does marketing and communications tie into all of this?

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Many organizations will expand or formalize their green initiatives in 2009. Whether you are simply looking to become more green aware, or to implement full-scale, company-wide programs, below are some simple considerations and real examples to ponder

Embracing digital mediums as an alternative to print.

Marketing budgets are often the first cut during a recession. But somehow you still need to communicate with customers and prospects. Luckily, marketing has evolved quite a bit and we are now seeing traditional media declining as the importance of online marketing tools—including your website—are achieving meaningful impact as low cost alternatives. These include the use of online video, email marketing campaigns, and involvement with social networking sites to create more paperless streams of communication.

For organizations that regularly disclose their financials, consider how producing a video annual report could help the environment. Simply Google the words “video annual report” and you’ll see that many companies have done away with the traditional, expensive printed booklets. Video annual reports do an exceptional job of conveying the personalities of the top executives and the company values while at the same time positively impacting the environment.

Green business efforts can help motivate, attract and retain good talent.

In today’s crowded business environment, job seekers need a competitive differentiator when deciding which company to work for. Many of today’s youngest potential employees consider corporate social responsibility a compelling reason to join a firm. Simple things such as creating program logos and internal signage can help you deliver a strong message to employees and other stakeholders regarding the environmental commitment being put forth. Another option is to develop an incentives plan offered through human resources. Bank of America gives employees a \$3,000 cash back reward for driving hybrid vehicles to work.

Communicate your efforts externally.

Once you have an initiative in place, you need to spread the word. If your efforts are honest and true, this is a great opportunity to differentiate yourself in your industry.

Promoting green initiatives can be as simple as having a logo or statement on all printed materials to creating and marketing products and services that are directly linked to environmental benefits. For example, some of America’s major financial institutions are beginning to take on environmental issues by offering “green mortgages” and location-efficient mortgages (LEMs). LEMs give borrowers credit for living in places where residents can routinely walk to stores, schools and public transportation, thereby boosting public transit ridership, reducing consumption and improving overall air quality.

Monitor your program.

Many larger organizations are creating positions for sustainability officers—employees whose sole responsibility is to help keep the company focused on creating a sustainable environment. Even if you are a smaller company, you can organize an internal team or committee to help you stay on track. These employees will feel empowered to create green ideas for the company, resulting in a win-win scenario in which employees feel valued and the environment benefits.

Above all, get creative!

Think about ways that you may alter your product or service to have a more positive effect on the environment. It may be easier than you think. Anheuser-Busch now saves 21 million pounds of metal per year by trimming an eighth of an inch off the diameter of the Budweiser beer can. It’s a simple adjustment for both manufacturing and consumers, but it says a lot about how we need to be thinking in 2009.