

Michelle Sheldon

President

Eco Marketing Services / Eco Promotional Products, Inc.



3 Ways to Develop and Implement a Successful Corporate Sustainability Program

Most companies want to be recognized for being environmentally responsible and as a good corporate citizen by managing a sustainability program. The challenge usually rests with turning the desire into the action. Here are three recommendations for starting and maintaining a successful sustainability program in your company.

1. Demonstrate Executive Buy-In

The majority of employees will inherently embrace a sustainability program, especially if they know that top management is committed to the program. This can become an important issue when employees are asked to change on-the-job habits and routines that impact their work assignments. Knowing that the executives endorse this program will encourage greater participation.

Keep in mind that this initiative should not end with employees – Your company should involve vendors and suppliers who have vested interest in your company's success and dedication to sustainability, which in turn may drive a change in their own sustainability efforts.

2. Create a Sustainability Committee

Identify a manager with a proven record for innovation and change and ideally a passion for sustainability. Make him or her the head of the sustainability effort. Bestowing the title of Sustainability Director will connote some authority and demonstrate that upper management stands behind this "champion" and has their full support, as well as the responsibility for making the program a success.

This champion should then form a committee that represents every major department of the company. This typically would include HR, training, facility management, marketing/communications, sales, purchasing, logistics, R&D and environmental/safety services. The committee needs to establish the company's environmental, economic and social goals as they relate to sustainability. The committee should try and meet monthly (make teleconference an option to reduce the impact of travel if representatives are in other locations), assign responsibilities, and set goals for measurement of the program's success.

The committee should also be charged with building and sustaining interest, as well as participation by distributing regular on-line updates, thanking employees that have made major contributions to the program, and issuing quarterly reports tracking success in meeting sustainability goals. A "Green" suggestion box for employees is also recommended and small rewards for ideas implemented. Dedication to understanding federal mandates and regulations before they are issued will prevent you from costly catch-up.

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3. Set Measureable Sustainability Goals

The quest to “do good” environmentally only goes so far within a company. At some point, questions will be asked about whether the effort was worth the rewards. That is why goals must be set so that the committee can report back to management that there was an appreciative ROI. This can best be addressed by establishing a baseline prior to the start of the program. Internal measurements may include, measuring pre-program office paper usage, overall electricity costs, printing costs (including ink cartridge/toner usage), elimination of disposable items, and recycling. External savings may include reductions in packaging, transportation and delivery costs, etc.

The company also must do some investment spending that will pay off in the long run. Start by replacing out-of-date electronic equipment with equipment that has earned the ENERGY STAR rating, which helps save energy through special energy-efficient designs, which allows them to use less energy to perform regular tasks, and automatically enter a low-power mode when not in use.

It is important that when a company asks employees to change habits and even sacrifice some comforts, this dedication is acknowledged. This may spread into encouraging & incenting more car pools, greater use of public transportation, resisting the temptation to print out every email, turning off lights at the end of the day, using reusable coffee cups instead of wasting paper or Styrofoam cups each day, and think about asking your premium and office item suppliers to limit items to those that are sustainable and recyclable.

Management will be mightily impressed when the sustainability committee can demonstrate that the company saved 2 tons of paper through recycling, cut energy costs by 20 percent, reduced ink and toner usage by 15 percent, and saved 550 gallons of gasoline in company vehicles, and customer satisfaction ratings went up exponentially, etc.

In the world of sustainability, if your company is standing still when it comes to embracing a sustainability program, you are actually falling behind. We are already seeing companies enjoy advantages when it comes to relationships with employees, vendors and customers. If you are already enjoying the rewards of a sustainability program, you're in good company. If not, all it takes is a bit of effort to get started. It's well worth the effort.

Michelle Sheldon (michelles@ecopromotionsonline.com) is president of certified woman-owned Eco Promotional Products, Inc. (EPP) Vernon Hills, Illinois, which supplies a breadth of environmentally and socially responsible merchandise to businesses and individuals interested in sustainability and respecting our natural resources.

