



Robert Ciccone

Bring in more green by being green leader

Trumpet eco-practices to earn kudos

The increasing pressure on businesses to become more environmentally sustainable is not a fad. It's not going away; in fact, it's only going to increase. It may seem like a big-business issue (oil and chemical companies, etc.) but it's not just big industry that needs to focus on this.

The "green" consumer market will only continue to grow, and it's an opportunity just waiting for smart small businesses to get in early on what will be the inevitable.

At this relatively early stage of the corporate social responsibility agenda, being a socially responsible business gives you something with which to differentiate yourself. It gives you a competitive advantage, some "newsworthy/media appeal." It's an attention-getting opportunity.

A good social responsibility practice gives your business several very significant benefits: it enhances your corporate image; develops customer appreciation; builds brand trust; and creates leadership positioning in your industry or marketplace.

Over this past year in various initiatives and tests that I have run for my clients, the sustainability angles have tended to fare well in generating positive attention, overall feedback and response. People consistently report that, all other things being equal, they'll buy a socially responsible/green product or service, because it makes them feel like they're doing their part.

Will being socially responsible cut into your ability to be profitable and competitive? After all, the measures needed to be responsible could also make your product or service more expensive. If this is the case, I would like to suggest that you get innovative in your thinking and do what it takes to figure out how to make it work from a cost perspective.

Often, cost savings can be found through design innovations that reduce materials, energy usage and waste associated with a product or service. Keep in mind this issue is not going away. Your efforts in this area will pay off in the long run.

In many instances, you don't always need to go out and develop a whole new "green" or socially respon-

sible product line. Sustainability can often be created inexpensively with a simple modification to an existing product or service.

For example, instead of using styrofoam packaging, switch to something recyclable, and then send out a press release explaining how and why you've made the switch. Or, create a program where you offer to take back the packaging for free so you can recycle it, and highlight that in your sales message.

I find a lot of companies are already green and sustainable in their practices; they just haven't been promoting it.

When I analyze what they're doing, I might learn that they're using recycled paper in their packaging; they have a fair labour policy in place when purchasing supplies; their fleet vehicles are "smart cars;" or something in their manufacturing process already meets certain environmental codes.

I have one client in the building-materials industry that has been using social responsible and sustainable practices for the past 20 years. We are now promoting this fact and using it as a unique feature. Guess what? It's working. They are making "some noise" with this and are now getting some wonderful opportunities that for years have eluded them.

How about your back-office procedures or manufacturing processes? Are there any "green or socially responsible secrets" you're already doing that could be uncovered and put in the forefront of your communications?

Being a socially responsible small business doesn't have to be costly or painful, and the efforts you make in the short term will have huge long-term payoffs for your business.

Sure, having a corporate social conscience is good from a people and planet perspective. But positioned, marketed and sold properly, it can also become your differentiating factor, which is great from a profit perspective. It's a win-win all around.

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