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along the way

The Road To Sustainability Begins With Innovation

Danny Schrager

I've been watching the green movement grow and change for years and find that time and time again both companies and individuals fail to realize a simple fact. Green may be good - but sustainability is better. Recycling has become part of the playbook for many companies looking to handle their waste in a more responsible way. The question is -"how do we make it truly sustainable?"

Recycling is a central component of running a more efficient business, and is a vital step in the quest for achieving sustainable business operations. While generating significant economic benefits for business, recycling also is the driving force behind the "green" movement today. In fact, the Office of the Federal Environmental Executive estimates that recycling and remanufacturing industries account for approximately one million manufacturing jobs and more than $100 billion in revenue.

While the environmental benefits of recycling are well known, the business and economic benefits of recycling are also significant. By turning waste into valuable, raw materials, recycling creates jobs, builds more competitive manufacturing industries and adds value to business and our economy. Recycling promotes community and business development while, preventing pollution, saving energy, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Profits suffer when a company wastes resources. Whether the waste comes in the form of post consumer plastic bags or as excess heat in a manufacturing plant, it is not only inefficient, but detrimental to the bottom line. Recycling can help conserve costs all along the supply chain, from material and energy costs to transportation and production expenses. Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott said it best when he set a zero-waste goal for the cost-conscious retailer in 2005. "Think about it, if we have to throw it away, we had to buy it first. So we pay twice. Once to get it, once to have it taken away."

Major corporations have already started implementing sustainable business strategies. For example, Subaru says 99.8% of the plant's refuse is recycled or reused, preventing almost all waste from landfills. Included in that number is a small portion, about 5%, that goes to a waste-to-energy plant that burns waste to make steam to heat Indianapolis' downtown. Subaru is one of a growing number of companies claiming or working toward "zero landfill" status. While success earns public relations praise, reuse and recycling also cuts costs to the tune of millions of dollars a year.

Like Subaru, other companies have discovered that recycling isn't just public relations. Being green can save some real green. Landfill disposal costs are continuing to increase, and simultaneously local governments are mandated by the state to reduce landfill waste disposal every year. Businesses nationwide will be affected by such mandates via higher garbage disposal costs. Recycling helps businesses avoid disposal costs associated with landfills and incinerators.

A growing number of companies are demonstrating that recycling and reuse programs can be cost-competitive with disposal options. This is particularly true if companies consider the "full cost" of solid waste disposal and account for the environmental and other negative impacts of waste generation. Recycling and waste reduction can keep these costs under control.

What is missing is innovation that makes the business case and the environmental benefits more compelling and desirable. Companies that innovate succeed. They are more profitable and adapt well to market changes. With the 'green wave' sweeping the nation, many firms find themselves grappling with how to take recycling to the next level and how to turn their waste into new revenue streams.

Technology and processes exist today that make it possible to truly close the recycling loop for businesses and consumers alike. Companies should begin exploring the ways they are addressing waste through new innovative recycling technologies, products designed to have zero waste lifecycles, and how companies are reporting their progress to customers and regulators. That is how we take the concept of green and go one step further towards genuine sustainability.

These innovative recycling solutions are a key to long-term growth. Recycling stimulates the development of green technology, and allows for and encourages the development of more environmentally friendly products. The vast supply of low-cost materials from recyclers has spurred many businesses to develop these types of cutting-edge technologies and products.

Businesses are starting to explore ways that designers can integrate and promote greener lifestyles, harnessing approaches such as:

- **Bio-mimicry:** designs inspired by nature

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- **Cradle-to-cradle:** recycling systems
- **Green chemistry:** less- or non-toxic alternatives to petrochemicals
- **Local sourcing:** to reduce transport energy use and emission

A Zero Waste strategy is a sound business strategy that, when integrated into business operations, provides a sustainable way to identify, prevent and reduce waste. Limited resources and foreign dependency of commodities are starting to take their toll on this country. Businesses nationwide need to innovate and take on sustainability initiatives now, beginning with robust recycling programs. Business savvy Americans understand that our society and corporate systems must begin to mimic nature and move from primarily linear product lifecycles to cyclical product lifecycles.

Zero waste promotes reuse and recycling, as well as the incorporation of designs that consider the entire product life cycle. The new designs will adhere to a certain set of sustainable standards that will also serve to reduce costs, reduce virgin material use, increase use of recycled materials, create more durable product lifecycles, and ease disassembly at end of life.

Sustainability is about closing the loop. It is a total solution that with vision and innovative solutions can forge a new era for the recycling industry, product development and the environmental movement in the United States.

Danny Schrager is CEO of Nextlife Inc, Founder and President of Mountain Valley Recycling. He has been in the plastics and recycling industries for more than twenty years.

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