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The Importance of Sustainability in Business

As we live in the 21st century, the time of severe droughts, deforestation, pollution, hunger, and global warming, we have all been given the great responsibility to act as responsibly and environmentally-friendly as possible. Both in our personal lives and on our business endeavors.

Business and the environment

Just like every household, every business also has a certain impact on the environment. And without that extra effort the impact is usually more or less negative. Every company uses some amount of water, energy (for heating or cooling the building, for lighting, for communication, for electrical devices, for production, etc.), and other resources. Moreover, every company uses some kind of transportation and produces a certain amount of waste. Some businesses even use chemicals and other materials that are bad for the environment (and the employees). The environmental impact of different industries may include issues such as $CO2$ and other emissions, energy consumption, water consumption, food consumption, waste disposal, chemical disposal, land use, noise, water and air pollution. The long-term effects are bad for the environment as well as the company costs.

Sustainability in business

According to scientists, we only have 12 years to prevent irreversible damage from climate change and to save the planet, therefore we should all start taking more responsibility. An environmentally friendly business recognizes that it has an impact on the environment and tries to minimize that impact. An environmentally-friendly business is a socially responsible business and being a socially responsible business is a 'must' nowadays. Sustainability in business is much more than a trend. The demand for sustainability is growing among consumers. The competition is big and consumers tend to search for the most environmentally-friendly option. Businesses that are bad for the environment are 'out', so are the companies that claim to be environmentally friendly for PR purposes, while actually engaging in unsustainable business practices. Environmentally-friendly companies aim to be sustainable in all areas. You don't have to get to that point right away, but you do need to have that as your goal and be making genuine efforts to reach it.

The benefits of sustainable businesses

Since the whole world is heading in the same direction, you should also consider going 'green'. Here is how sustainability will benefit your company.

- Sustainability saves costs in the long run and improves profitability by reducing energy consumption, water consumption, and waste. Cost reduction can be achieved by investing in better operational procedures and emerging environmental technologies. By simply switching to more efficient lighting, heating or cooling systems you can save thousands of dollars a year. Reducing unnecessary plastic packaging on your products is good for the environment and your wallet. Switching to energy efficiency may include some upfront costs, but over time sustainable practices always pay off.
- Sustainability preserves our environment for future generations. The human impact on the environment has already reached critical levels when it comes to pollution, species extinction, and climate change. To reverse the harm, we need to act now. You can either be part of the solution or you can hold on to harmful business practices until forced by government regulation to abandon them.
- Sustainability gives you an immediate popularity advantage over the companies that don't make efforts to become environmentally-friendly, as consumers are more likely to support sustainable companies. Fact is, that many of your customers care deeply about the environment. According to researchers, more than half of consumers would pay more for a product that came in environmentally-friendly packaging. Adapting sustainable business practices can improve your brand reputation immensely and make your business even more successful. Businesses with environmental, social, and governance policies tend to outperform those that don't have such policies.
- You can become a market leader in your own niche or on your location, which will give you a competitive advantage.
- Incorporating sustainable values will win you loyal customers as the consumer's loyalty to a brand depends mostly on shared values with the business.
- Becoming sustainable can significantly boost your brand awareness, as eco-business goes hand in hand with various awards and recognitions, valued by potential customers and partners.
- Water pollution, air pollution, and similar accusations can severely damage your reputation and becoming sustainable will minimize that risk.
- Governments all around the world are offering funds, grants, tax write-offs and other forms of support to sustainable brands.
- Environmental regulations are being enforced by law. By employing green technologies and methods, businesses can be better prepared for any new environmental restrictions that may come in the future.
- Being sustainable is healthy for the people who work in the industry. It can improve the employee's engagement, and help businesses connect with staff. It is becoming increasingly important for people to work for a company that is doing 'the right thing'.

How to Make Your Business More Sustainable

By now you know why you need to focus on making your business as sustainable as possible. The next step is knowing exactly how to achieve your goals. The specific actions you take will depend on your business type, but here is a list of general and useful steps you can take to create a sustainable brand.

First of all, you should consider getting an audit to get a holistic picture of your current environmental practices and to help you understand what you need to focus on. Also, contact a local energy consultant to get an energy audit. If you are a small firm with a limited budget, then you can try to do it yourself. Go through all of your offices or factories, review your processes and ask yourself how they could be made more efficient and eco-friendly. Ask yourself how to lower energy and water consumption, how to produce less waste, how to switch to environmentally-friendly transport, how to partner up with environmentally-friendly companies, how to switch to renewable energy, how to reduce, reuse, recycle.

Secondly, you have to create an environmental policy to establish what your company wants to focus on. State your goals and methods and make sure to follow up with regular internal progress checks and reports.

Lastly, you need to educate your employees on sustainability and make sure they stick to your environmental policy. Teach staff members to turn off the lights. Encourage them to dispose of trash in the right receptacles. Consider hiring a 'responsible' person to oversee and prioritize your sustainability efforts.

Once you've set your goals and made a detailed plan and timeline, it's time to take action. Make sure to constantly review your progress and adapt if necessary.

Here is a list of very specific small changes that you can implement and that would make a major difference.

Energy and water consumption:

- Use energy more efficiently.
- Invest in energy efficient electronic devices and machines.
- Enforce a fixed maintenance schedule to keep the equipment running appropriately and energy-efficiently.
- Reduce your reliance on electronic devices.
- Encourage your employees to switch off the lights and embrace natural light instead.
- Install automatic lighting sensors.
- Invest in CFL and LED bulbs, as they are much more energy efficient than the regular incandescent light bulbs.
- Encourage your employees to power down their computers and monitors when not in use.
- Encourage your employees to unplug all electronic devices when not in use, as they keep consuming energy even if they are switched off. Instead of unplugging each device individually, you can use power strips and simply flip a switch.
- Reduce air conditioning use. Heating and air conditioning systems pump greenhouse gas emissions from offices into the atmosphere and use up vast amounts of electricity.
- Switch to clean renewable energy, such as wind or sun (solar power).
- Choose eco-friendly transportation and encourage employees to take public transportation.
- Reduce water consumption (e.g. by running the office dishwashers when full and by fixing leaky taps).
- Track your energy, water usage, waste, and carbon outputs associated with building operations and set a goal of reducing your carbon emissions.

Recycling and waste management:

- Reduce packaging and waste. Offices often produce a lot of waste, including equipment – they regularly update it to stay competitive.
- Start a recycling program and make sure to recycle used electronic devices as well.
- Save paper and encourage others to do the same.
- Switch to recyclable products and recycle waste. Install recycler baskets and add easy instructions to make it as effortless as possible for visitors and staff to recycle. By recycling, you would save a lot of money on waste management.
- Switch from disposable cups and dishes to reusable ones and save thousands of kilograms of CO_2 emissions each year.
- Say goodbye to any type of single-use plastic, including straws. Reduce the use of paper and other disposables.

Food waste and food sustainability:

- In case you serve food, make sure to serve smaller portions. Leftovers can be donated to food banks and other charity organizations.
- Minimize the use of meat as animal agriculture is proven to have a negative impact on the environment. You can do so by offering vegan and vegetarian dishes and by using the whole animal.
- Shift to more sustainable and healthier cuisine by integrating local products and using fresh, seasonal food. Also, make sure to use organic produce, hormone-free meats and dairy, and other natural products.
- Try to find alternatives to water in plastic bottles and thus reduce plastic waste. Switch to filtered water dispensers, complimentary refillable bottles, or other sustainable options.

Eco-friendly products, services, production, and partners:

- Use environmentally friendly products, such as eco-friendly soaps, cleaning products, inks, and other supplies. The latter have proven to be less irritating to guests, employees, and the environment.
- When purchasing the products you are planning to use in your business premises, make sure to buy them from environmentally-friendly and socially conscious vendors.
- Cooperate with eco-friendly companies. Always make sure to find eco-friendly suppliers, vendors or other business partners. Conduct a supply chain audit and cover all the ethical, environmental and transportation aspects.
- Set up an environmentally-friendly production process. Consider upgrading the machinery and streamlining processes to make them more efficient.
- Use environmentally friendly and recyclable packaging for your products. Determine if it is possible to reduce the amount of packaging without compromising on the quality.
- Try to reduce your carbon footprint during distribution. Consider incorporating green vehicles in your facility.

Eco-friendly business premises:

- Create an eco-friendly office. Use eco-friendly flooring and furniture options made from renewable or recycled materials, sustainable fabrics made from hemp or bamboo for window coverings, and bamboo curtain rods. Also, consider getting some second-hand furniture.
- Block sun with window tinting and/or blinds to avoid additional costs on air conditioning.
- Install solar water heaters.
- Install efficient taps, and low-flow toilets.
- Insulate your business premises and avoid additional costs on heating or air conditioning.

Initiatives and carbon offsetting:

- Consider introducing a green business certification program for your company.
- Show the world that you are doing your best to be environmentally-friendly and socially responsible and encourage others (clients, suppliers, and partners) to follow your lead.
- Support environmental causes.
- Join the 'Earth Hour' initiative by turning out your lights every year for 60 minutes to raise awareness of the consequences of coal, gas, and oil being used to power the world´s industries and of the importance of saving energy.
- Launch your own sustainable initiative, such as planting trees in order to combat deforestation and global warming and to attract more environmentally conscious costumers.
- Plan events to raise sustainability issues within the company. For example, you can celebrate Earth Day or partner with local environmental groups or charities and organize a local clean-up.
- Start an employee network. Find a group of employees who care for the environment that can meet on a regular basis to plan awareness-raising events, advocate for change within the company, and contribute to the community.
- Educate yourself on how to make your business more sustainable.
- Consider carbon offsetting. Carbon offsetting is the best way to become more socially responsible. Carbon offsetting projects allow companies, organizations, and individuals to invest in environmental projects around the world in order to balance out their carbon footprints and thus make a great contribution to preventing climate change. Some projects are designed to reduce future emissions by investing in green energy technologies, others, including our own, soak up CO_2 directly from the air through the planting of trees. For more information contact us (email address in the footer).

Becoming sustainable may require some initial (somewhat costly) investments. However, as you know you'll get an immediate return on your investment by saving money on the long run, sustainability is a no-brainer.

Thank you for caring about the environment, the wildlife, our future generations, and ultimately your own business. The future is in your hands.

With love,

Matic and Carmen Pirc