

Real results

Company sustainability initiatives impact more than the environment

INTERVIEWED BY ADAM BURROUGHS

Sustainability planning sets the direction for your organization, says Doug Piekarz, vice president of planning and conservation for the Akron Zoo. The plans, in the end, result in efficiency and cost savings.

“Not paying attention to sustainability planning is much like saying you’re not concerned about efficiency or saving money because both are end results of sustainability planning,” he says.

Smart Business spoke with Piekarz about the impact sustainability planning has on organizations and how to promote the results without being dismissed by consumers.

What are some basic steps companies can take to better conserve resources?

It all boils down to the old saying, ‘What gets measured gets managed.’ If you’re concerned about a resource, you’ll monitor its use. Looking at your business’s consumption of electric and gas, your waste hauling and general purchasing habits gives you a sense of your usage and leads you to question why it’s at that level.

At the zoo, in 2011, we put our entire executive team in our dumpsters. We all climbed in and sorted through the waste to determine what was in the trash that we could divert from the landfill. We determined that 80 percent of the material we threw away was organic and could be composted. Since we began composting waste, we’ve diverted more than 2 million pounds of it from landfills.

The same thing can happen for any business. It just means taking a step back, understanding your consumption, measuring it and setting goals.

There’s a misnomer that sustainability plans costs money. There can be

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larger capital costs that eventually help companies reduce their impact, but our dumpster experiment shows there are easy and inexpensive ways to reduce consumption, save money and be more sustainable.

What is the payoff for companies that implement a sustainability plan?

The payoff depends on the company. If social responsibility is important to a company and they want to demonstrate it, there are sustainability planning methods and metrics that directly feed a social responsibility report. There are plans that focus on reducing costs, creating efficiencies and innovating that offer value in both the short- and long-term.

At the zoo, we set plans in three-year blocks because we’re working within a seven-year master plan. Every three years we look at what we’ve accomplished and make adjustments. We have long-term goals, such as aspiring to be zero waste and reduce our water and sewer usage by 50 percent.

It’s these long-term goals that inspire people to be creative. Staff needs to get involved to beat your goals. The most commonly unsung value is unleashing the creativity of your staff. When the staff is empowered and inspired, nothing can stand in their way.

How can companies promote their sustainability efforts without the news being dismissed as hollow PR?

Companies need data. Greenwashing is when a company claims that their processes or products are effectively sustainable but those claims can’t be backed up with data. If you can establish a data-driven claim, it’s not likely to be dismissed by consumers.

To this end, many companies are seeking third-party certifications. These third-party groups audit your paperwork and confirm the results are real.

How might recognition of a company’s sustainability efforts by a third party benefit a company?

When the Summit of Sustainability (SOSA) judges review companies’ applications, they look at the metrics that have been provided to see if there’s validation.

What’s different than other third-party entities is that the SOSA award committee is dedicated to creating a mentoring-style relationship between businesses and municipalities. They promote local companies that are doing their part to protect our planet and community, recognizing our peers for their hard work. This helps drive local customers and consumers to visit and support local businesses that are trying to do good work for the right reasons. ●