

# Demand for change

## How consumer beliefs on climate change pressure businesses to act

INTERVIEWED BY ADAM BURROUGHS

Americans want more stringent policies to reduce carbon emissions, but they don't want to take any actions themselves. Instead, they're pressuring private businesses to take action, particularly with a carbon emissions reduction policy. "A record number of shareholder resolutions have been issued to companies requiring them to disclose their environmental risk and performance," says Nicholas Zingale, Ph.D., associate professor and director of the masters of public administration at Cleveland State University, and founder of Affinity Consultants. There's a trend occurring where Americans are increasingly trying to elicit attention toward climate change and sustainability, but rather than using the political system they're putting pressure directly on businesses.

*Smart Business* spoke with Zingale to learn more about how American attitudes on climate change are affecting businesses.

### Are Americans becoming more skeptical about climate change?

A 2013 study from Stanford University, titled *Public Attitudes About Climate Change and Clean Energy*, shows American's concern regarding climate change hasn't significantly varied since 1997. Statistically speaking, approximately 80 percent believe the earth is warming and humans are a main cause, but when considering this a threat, the number drops to approximately 65 percent. Americans believe the earth is warming, but don't understand the impacts associated with it to the same degree.

### Is there evidence that climate change is impacting the environment?

Climate change will foreclose upon some, but will open up opportunities for others.

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For example, after BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill the gross domestic product in the Gulf of Mexico area increased because of the vast amounts of federal funding spent on fighting and cleaning it up — even with a collapse in the region's traditional economy. That's one of the distortions that exist with GDP — it doesn't tell us that something is good or bad, it just tells us money is being spent. Regardless of the headlines coming from the latest global disaster, it is important to know that there is activity currently underway to help communities become more resilient to the effects of climate change. For example, a major collaboration has begun between Google Maps, Intel, Microsoft and other institutions to create algorithms that would help predict localized climate change impacts such as flooding, sea-level rise, natural disasters, drought and others. These initiatives signify vast agreement that climate change will result in economic, social and environmental impacts.

### Is the U.S. getting any closer to a national policy on climate change?

In June 2013, President Barack Obama directed his administration to work on a climate action plan. The March 2014 plan focuses primarily on methane emissions, a safe area to work within because there can be some political consensus. Those waiting for a national policy are probably better off

directing their energy more locally.

A competitive opportunity exists for businesses to better position themselves as progressive organizations in the public eye. For example, the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy listed Ohio as one of the most improved states in energy efficiency, ranking it in the top 20. The next phase of the energy efficiency trend is carbon auditing and management.

### What does this mean for businesses that are developing sustainability related initiatives?

Businesses are expanding the definition of sustainability to also include public health, access to food, affordable housing and reduced poverty. There's an emphasis on using wealth-building practices to stabilize communities as a part of good corporate citizenship in contributing to the local quality of life. This means businesses now must be thinking about sustainability in broader terms. At the same time, they should be very careful that their metrics and statements are properly vetted to prevent green-washing or social-washing. It is worth noting that KPMG, a global auditing company, looked at the top 250 organizations in the world and found 93 percent of them had issued corporate social responsibility and sustainability reports. The expectation is that this trend will continue to trickle down to smaller businesses. ●