

Tell your sustainability story, minus the hype

By now many of us are starting to slack off on our New Year's resolutions to become healthier, happier, more productive superhumans.

With good intentions in place, we try to cram these lofty goals into our already hectic lives. Then we break them because they're simply not sustainable unless they become integral to our daily operation.

The same is true of businesses that still think going "green" is something to talk about rather than wholeheartedly do.

The concept of being "green" started as a buzzword several years ago, something companies could attach to their advertising to convince customers they care about more than just making a buck. Since that time, the concept now referred to as "sustainability" has evolved considerably and is becoming a fundamental part of how companies do business.

As such, marketing efforts to tout sustainability, previously seen as fluffy, now are respected for their

proven power to affect the bottom line.

"It's becoming important for all businesses to think about sustainability because global companies are



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Economic
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starting to mandate it from their suppliers, which creates a market trickle-down effect," said Dale Washburn, principal of Washburn Communication. "The idea has gone from hype to home, and is now pervasive throughout the value chain."

Washburn and his colleague, Chris Lemoine, recently spoke to the Three Rivers Entrepreneur Network about how businesses can approach and articulate their sustainability messages. According to Lemoine, a company has a valid sustainability practice if it encompasses and benefits all

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three elements of what he termed The Triple Bottom Line: environmental, economic and social.

"There is a lot of 'greenwashing' out there, companies pasting on sustainability messages to their marketing because someone thinks it's a good idea to jump on the bandwagon," Lemoine said. "What often results from this approach are irrelevant practices, empty messaging and unconnected imagery."

True sustainability in this context is about practices, products and services that contribute to lasting, positive triple bottom-line impact. It

essentially represents a business at its best, doing what it does well, in financially responsible ways that benefit the environment and respect customer values.

When developing your sustainability message, you must be consistent, authentic, credible and concise. You must convey triple bottom-line results and maintain alignment with your mission and brand. And the message must be meaningful to your key audiences — including employees, customers, investors, the media and supply chain partners.

As a starting point, Washburn and Lemoine suggest taking inventory of all of the ways your business is incorporating sustainable practices. Then assess those practices against benchmarks including input from your key audiences, social media conversations, comparison with competitors and regulatory and industry-specific standards, certifications and requirements for sustainability marketing.

Ask yourself the right questions to keep your messaging on track. Is the fact that your energy-efficient light bulb company is using recycled paper in your corporate offices as meaningful as the energy your products conserve? Or as meaningful as a longer product life that results in fewer bulbs in landfills? What about the emissions reduction at your production facilities due to energy-efficient manufacturing practices?

If done right, telling your sustainability story is an opportunity to broadcast your accomplishments, efficiencies and savings. It can lead to more productive relationships with key stakeholders, extend your brand equity and strengthen customer and partner loyalty. And it can — and should — positively affect your bottom line.

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