

Greener Horizons Summary: Sustainability in Action

Background

In May 2010, Bullfrog Power invited communications and sustainability executives from leading Canadian organizations, including Strandberg Consulting, Novex Couriers, Vancity Credit Union and the Vancouver Convention Centre, to participate in a panel discussion on how to ensure your sustainability plan brings about meaningful action within and beyond your organization. Panelists included: Coro Strandberg, Principal, Strandberg Consulting; Rob Safrata, CEO, Novex Couriers; Maureen Cureton, Green Business Manager, Vancity Credit Union; and Catherine Wong, Vice President of Operations, Vancouver Convention Centre. Key learnings from the session are outlined below.

Definition and elements of sustainability

Strandberg Consulting works with companies on implementing sustainability strategy. Coro Strandberg has found that there is great diversity when it comes to the way companies approach the environment. Some organizations implement “random acts of greenness,” while others have developed a level of environmental programming. Progressive organizations typically have a comprehensive environmental strategy in place. Strandberg suggests the following for creating a successful sustainability strategy:

- **Define sustainability** – Create a definition for sustainability and include social, environmental and economic aspects in your definition. An organization needs to be crystal clear on what sustainability means in order to deliver a successful sustainability strategy.
- **Know your Business Case** – Organizations that understand the business value of its sustainability plan can drive benefits while maintaining focus over the long term.
- **Senior Level Commitment** – Buy-in from the top level is needed for real results. Processes for staff to buy-in and become engaged will add to your sustainability program.
- **Vision** – A core vision is essential to moving forward. Where does your company want to be in the future, what does it want to achieve? Be sure to include sustainability in the organization’s vision, and integrate components such as employee engagement and innovation.

Embed sustainability into everyday decision making – Businesses need to rethink the decision-making process to ensure sustainability is incorporated into all day-to-day operations. Strandberg suggests all business lines and functions will need to integrate social and environmental factors eventually, whether that is purchasing, investing, capital projects, manufacturing, marketing, or human resource management, for example. To stay ahead of – or at least keep up with – the pack, Strandberg advises companies should be rethinking and retooling their operations sooner than later.

Integrating sustainability strategy into everyday operations

Novex Delivery solutions is one of the largest same-day couriers in the Lower Mainland with over 100 deliveries vehicles making more than 2,000 deliveries per day. The company started going green in April 2003, and CEO Rob Safrata says the company becomes more successful as it increases its focus on sustainability. When it comes to best practices regarding the environment, Safrata recommends the following:

Foster change and innovation within the organization – New ideas and new ways of thinking are needed in order to reach sustainability goals. With a visionary goal of reducing its carbon emissions footprint by 70 per cent by 2015, Novex will use hybrids, PHEVs and EVs. The organization found that drivers are unable to afford these expensive vehicles, so the company thought outside the box and plans to sell wrap advertising on its vehicles to mitigate costs.

Think beyond cost cutting – Businesses often begin their work on the environment by implementing initiatives that reduce costs. For example, Novex chose to use less paper, implement an automatic billing process and create a digital courier product. Novex encourages organizations to think *beyond* cost cutting, however, and find ways to integrate sustainability into all areas of the business. To this end, Novex has signed on its facility for green electricity with Bullfrog Power to further reduce its environmental footprint. “We’re finding that by going above and beyond cost-cutting measures, we are attracting new, environmentally aware customers and increasing customer retention,” notes Safrata.

Take pride in what you do – Becoming more sustainable is better business. When an organization takes action for the environment, a strong sense of pride is created within the company.

Sustainability in action

B.C.’s Vancity Credit Union is Canada’s largest credit union with 400,000 members. The company is on a path toward sustainability, says Maureen Cureton, and has many successful sustainability initiatives in place. Here are Maureen’s key insights with regard to sustainability:

Be Authentic – Measure and communicate your organization’s commitments and actions to ensure authenticity and to avoid being associated with greenwashing.

Be Creative – Make space within your plan for products and services that are creative. For example, Vancity created a connection between its environmental commitments and its Visa card. Vancity’s EnviroVisa donates five per cent of profits to environmental organizations involved in local projects. Profit-sharing is not out-of-the-box thinking. However, Vancity leverages this initiative to further interact with members (customers).

Engage customers – Find ways to engage your customers through environmental activities. Through its EnviroVisa program, Vancity asks customers what environmental issues are important to them and engages community experts to help it determine which projects to fund. For example, local food security was identified as a key topic of interest by customers so Vancity is now exploring ways to finance initiatives in this area.

Find value – Businesses need to find a rate of return. Running a business that respects the planet is part of the solution. Simple things like saving energy by improving energy efficiency and changing light bulbs are easy solutions that can help cut costs. Developing environment-related products or delivering on your environmental sustainability commitments, on the other hand, can help generate brand lift, greater customer loyalty and new market opportunities. Beyond giving \$400,000 back to local environmental groups in 2009, Vancity's EnviroVisa was one of the company's most profitable product offerings. Its business members like being able to give back to the environment through its products.

Don't expect to be perfect – “There are no completely sustainable businesses out there,” says Cureton, “Just those that are on the path to sustainability.” Don't let that stop your organization from taking big or small steps toward sustainability, and sharing your actions and commitments with your stakeholders. Communicating your commitments will provide an opportunity to attract customers that share the same values, and gain feedback on stakeholder expectations.

Celebrate successes – When Vancity reached a significant environmental milestone, the company held an event to celebrate the achievement. The event led to a testimonial endorsement by a local environmental non-profit organization and positive staff engagement—both added benefits to Vancity.

Implementation and engagement of sustainability practices at the Vancouver Convention Centre

The Vancouver Convention Centre's West Building recently achieved LEED Platinum certification. To achieve this status, the centre implemented a number of green initiatives, including a six-acre green roof, seawater heating and cooling system, artificial reefs, an on-site water treatment system and renewable electricity with Bullfrog Power. “It wasn't always like this,” says Catherine Wong. Sustainability started out at the VCC in its original East Building and the company has learned best practices throughout the years. Wong shares practices that have worked at the Vancouver Convention Center:

Changing operations – Choose a simple green program and extend it to all areas of operations. The VCC's East Building began with the three Rs—reduce, reuse and recycle—and integrated them throughout all functional areas of the building, including food services, administration, operations, client services and housekeeping.

Accept sustainability as a long term goal – Sustainability efforts take time, yet they will create long term benefits. For example, the VCC's scratch kitchen, which uses local ingredients without additives, avoids disposable utensils and dishes, and donates leftover food to local charities, took time to implement. However, the kitchen has been running and producing strong results for 22 years.

Embed behaviors, beliefs and principles into business culture – It is important for stakeholders to understand and participate in sustainability efforts.

- **Engaging staff** – The VCC has secured bike storage, lockers and shower facilities for staff who want to ride to work. The VCC also provides an incentive to staff for choosing greener transportation options. Using environmentally friendly housekeeping products and upgraded recycling bins, the VCC provides visual cues to help change employee behavior.

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- **Engaging clients** – Clients understand that by participating in the VCC’s sustainability efforts they will also benefit. They are encouraged to track the number of people attending an event to minimize food waste, use water in jugs instead of bottled water and engage in the recycling program. Clients are also encouraged to use the VCC’s online sustainable meeting planning guide.
- **Engaging the public** – The VCC offers public programs throughout the building to raise awareness about sustainability. The convention centre also creates social media videos for youtube and twitter and facebook postings to engage the public on its sustainability efforts. In addition, the VCC participates in the City of Vancouver audio tour; the public can dial in on their cell phone and one of the VCC’s LEED design architects will speak about sustainability features within the West Building.