



Report on Small Business: ENVIRONMENT

Small firms can go green, too - there's lots of help out there

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With economic fears top of mind, going green may not be the major concern for small businesses. But, as one boutique hotel found, turning it into an environmentally friendly operation was well worth it in terms of cost savings and attracting customers. But it took several years and the help of green consultants.

So, what's an entrepreneur who wants to turn his business a quick shade of green supposed to do?

There are plenty of resources out there to help small businesses immediately become more eco-friendly.

Or, like the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto's trendy Queen Street West area, they may want to develop a long-term strategy.

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The hotel was built in 1889, so turning it into an energy-efficient green property took time. Chris Mitchell, the Gladstone's marketing, publicity and exhibitions manager, said the hotel hired Green Shift consultants after the current owners bought it in 2002 to do an environmental audit of the property and develop a strategy, which took several years to implement. Now, it uses non-toxic cleaning supplies; composts its restaurant waste, uses only compostable take-out food containers and has revamped its heating and lighting systems.

The hotel saved money in energy costs and attracts environmentally conscious customers, says Ms. Mitchell. "The exposure for us as a business and the experience of interacting with other businesses that have similar philosophies ... makes you feel like you are part of something that is bigger and more important."

Small businesses that haven't yet taken similar environmental measures are starting to feel the pressure to conform but may not know why it's important or how to do it.

John W. Walker, president and chief executive officer of the environmental consulting firm Transition Plus Sustainability Solutions Inc. in Toronto, says it's often a desire to cut energy costs, as well as growing social pressure from consumers, that drives companies to adopt environmentally friendly practices.

As well, he says, governments are starting to write sustainability requirements into their procurement terms, forcing companies that want to bid on government contracts to prove that they are doing business in an environmentally responsible way.

Where to start

The energy departments of virtually all provinces and territories have websites offering information on how to save money by using water and energy more efficiently. Many suggestions are painless and cheap, like changing to energy-efficient lighting; ensuring that the photo copier and computers are switched off each night, and buying a refillable water cooler for the lunch room instead of offering bottled water.

Mr. Walker says these kinds of actions are the first thing that businesses should be looking at.

Other examples include:

Ensuring that all photo copying is double-sided and that only recycled paper or paper marked with the Forest Stewardship Council's FSC symbol (indicating it came from a sustainable forest) are used;

Sourcing eco-friendly cleaning supplies and soap products, while company pens should be of the sort made from compostable corn-based material (as opposed to plastic) and use vegetable ink;

Providing places where employees can lock up bicycles, helping staff to organize car pools and encouraging public transit use can reduce air pollution.

If your office is one where people are either freezing or roasting all the time, take a look at how the desks are positioned in relation to the heating and cooling vents. It may be possible to rearrange the work area to move people away from vents or toward sunny windows.

Longer term

For longer-term fixes, the federal government's ecoACTION program website details information about programs geared to helping organizations reduce energy costs. It also has a link to information about the ecoENERGY Retrofit program, which provides financial incentives of up to 25 per cent of project costs to a maximum of \$50,000 to help small and medium-sized commercial and institutional buildings and industrial facilities implement energy saving projects.

Many business organizations, such as chambers of commerce and business improvement area associations, also offer sustainability information and support to small businesses.

In Toronto, greenTbiz is a project of the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas that works free of charge with small business and property owners within the Greater Toronto Area to develop and implement environmental programs.

"We wouldn't make a recommendation that didn't make financial sense, either by reducing their costs or through improved marketing," says program manager Chantal Brundage. Most of the 150 businesses that have used the program in the 2 ½ years it has existed have fewer than 20 employees, she added.

Companies can also help each other go green. In Toronto a group of 385 eco-minded businesses pay \$195 a year to belong to a network, called Green Enterprise Toronto, where they swap business, advice and referrals.

Christopher Lowry, the network's director and founder, says members attempt to source their suppliers locally (ideally from other members) and are philosophically committed to sustainable purchasing, manufacturing and recycling of products. The network publishes a directory of members and runs regular workshops on a range of topics relevant to small businesses including financing and marketing as well as issues like environmental and social responsibility.

"There are lots of small young entrepreneurs who can use the boost you get from a business network like ours," Mr. Lowry says.

Many businesses, such as the Gladstone Hotel, turn to environmental consulting firms to get an energy and/or sustainability audit of their operations and receive recommendations for improvement. In most provinces, there are no regulations or certification required for people working as energy auditors.

Energy audits can range from a simple walk-through, where the consultant performs a basic visual inspection of a facility and provides an assessment, to technology-specific audits. This might be done in cases where a building owner decides the lighting system or furnace is getting old and hires a specialist to look at it, possibly conduct efficiency tests, and make recommendations. A full facilities audit could have a team of engineers and architects look at an entire building and offer suggestions for redesigning it. And technology consultants can make software and hardware recommendations to reduce energy consumption.

Mr. Lowry says that in addition to cost-savings, businesses are also being driven to go green because "they're getting uncomfortable questions from their children and staff members" about why they aren't doing more.

"The most interesting companies understand it [sustainability] from the point of view that transparency in how you operate is becoming increasingly important" to success in business, he says.