

Small business environmental sustainability: Student-applied practices

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ABSTRACT

Due to increased competition and globalization, which has forced business organizations to create more positive environmental and social changes to their businesses, organizations will be seeking managers who have a strong understanding of sustainability practices so they may stay ahead in this changing environment. This study examines the effects, if any, of using student-applied sustainability practices in several small businesses, by evaluating various small business case studies to better understand the attributes of sustainable development. The study also discusses ways of measuring sustainability and performance in business practices, while exploring various small business cases for sustainability-focused initiatives.

A business may be described as "sustainable" once it meets three criteria: incorporating sustainability principles in most of its business decisions; supplying products and services that are environmentally friendly; and forming a commitment towards environmental principles within its business operations.

Educating students about sustainability practices ensures that the future owners of small businesses have a well-structured set of principles on which to found their company, thus steering it towards success and instilling the same values in its workers. For small businesses to experience a broader vision of success, they need new business tools and practices that are receptive to new ideas and opportunities.

Over a period of four years, students partnered with a local Sam's Club and other small businesses to develop environmentally sustainable enterprises. The goal was to inspire sustainable practices in the lives of business members and their businesses, as well as with their customers and communities. This study observed the effects of student-applied sustainability practices on several small businesses, in an attempt to determine how feasible it would be to convert such businesses into sustainable enterprises economically, environmentally, and socially.

Keywords: sustainability, small business, student, corporation, environment, partnerships,

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INTRODUCTION

According to a recent study carried out by Duquesne University, over 120,000 business management degrees are awarded each year in the US. However, only a fraction of these graduates will apply sustainability practices to their careers. Experts speculate that in the next five years, this trend will change due to increased interest in energy conservation, carbon trading, green buildings and climate change. This is due to increased competition and globalization, which has forced business organizations to create more positive environmental and social changes to their businesses (Kolleck, 2010). Therefore, these organizations will be seeking managers who have a strong understanding of sustainability practices so they may stay ahead in this changing environment.

This study examines the effects, if any, of using student-applied sustainability practices in several small businesses, by evaluating various small business case studies to better understand the attributes of sustainable development. The study will also discuss ways of measuring sustainability and performance in business practices, while exploring various small business cases for sustainability-focused initiatives (UNEP, 2010).

BACKGROUND

“Student-applied sustainability practices” are principles employed by some businesses or organizations to diminish any negative impacts that their operations may have on the economy, society or the environment (Hodgson, 2009). For example, small businesses that have implemented sustainable practices often have progressive human rights and environmental policies well in place.

A business may be described as “sustainable” once it meets three criteria: incorporating sustainability principles in most of its business decisions; supplying products and services that are environmentally friendly; and forming a commitment towards environmental principles within its business operations.

Modern small-scale businesses that make it a goal to profit from becoming a more environmentally sustainable organization usually enjoy a longer time horizon. Such businesses also experience a broader set of organizational goals as compared to conventional small businesses. Having a sustainable, strategic business plan ensures that the business demonstrates its concern for the wellbeing of its workers, its society and its culture. A sustainable business plan also ensures that the definition of the business is more sophisticated and long-term (un.org, United Nations Millennium Development Goals, 2010).

Educating students about sustainability practices ensures that the future owners of small businesses have a well-structured set of principles on which to found their company, thus steering it towards success and instilling the same values in its workers. For small businesses to experience a broader vision of success, they need new business tools and practices that are receptive to new ideas and opportunities.

SUSTAINABILITY PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

Sustainability Principles for Small Businesses

There are two major principles that all sustainable businesses follow: operational and strategic. The operational principle focuses on the practical aspect of a sustainable business's daily operations, while the strategic principle is mainly used as a guide to set the direction of the business. The operational principle addresses four main aspects of running a business. The first is environmental responsibility; a business has to respect the environment in which it operates. It has to ensure that its use of natural resources is minimized, while considering manufacturing waste levels and its long-term effects.

The organization also has to be a good employer, to prove that it remains committed to its workers' wellbeing, personal development, and satisfaction (Gajdzk, 2010). Small businesses may increase their sustainability by ensuring that all of their employees, from the senior management level to the lowest paid, are treated with fairness and equity in all their activities. This approach not only keeps workplaces safe, but workers are motivated and encouraged to increase their output.

The third aspect of running a business under the operational principle is contributing towards the community. Irrespective of the size of the business, it has to contribute towards the community in which it operates. This may be achieved through sourcing materials locally or participating in local community programs. The fourth feature of the operational principle is working to influence others. The business has to keep their stakeholders motivated in order to increase the sustainability of its operations. For example, a business may make it easier for its clients to recycle their products, or larger multinationals may implement labor standards that ensure raw materials are not acquired through child labor.

The strategic principle also addresses four aspects of sustainability. First, a business should remain transparent and accountable in all its actions, particularly in matters concerning its stakeholders and the community in which it operates. Secondly, the business has to integrate long-term goals through an innovative approach (Flanagan, 2007). This ensures that small businesses consider the long-term implications of all decisions made. The business has to look for solutions that are beneficial to all parties, as opposed to seeking solutions at the expense of others. For example, recycling waste materials may save a small business a substantial amount of expenditure while at the same time reducing waste. The third aspect of the strategic principle stresses the importance of integrating sustainability within the business. Sustainability has to be one of the business's main priorities and should be reflected in most actions of the organization, particularly in decision making and performance management. This ensures that sustainability decisions are strategically implemented throughout the company's operations. The last aspect of the strategic principle explains the need to minimize risk and maximize opportunities, emphasizing the risks and uncertainties that small businesses face when making decisions. The principle also underscores the importance of taking a precautionary approach when making strategic decisions, especially those that may cause irreversible damage (Owens, 2010).

Student-Applied Sustainability Principles to Small Businesses

In addition to outlining the importance of implementing student-applied sustainability principles in today's businesses, this study also provides the knowledge necessary for managers of small- and medium- sized businesses to successfully implement sustainable operations

environmentally, economically, and socially (Moreli, 2009). A student must first recognize the prompts that indicate whether or not sustainability has been integrated into a business successfully. Such prompts include industry norms and policies whose purpose is to make sure sustainability measures are being integrated. For example, a small business may implement a policy that offers workers paid time off if they choose to perform additional tasks as volunteers.

Other such policies include fair trade and organizational environmental goals. A student must be able to identify the type of certification system required for a particular small business (for example, a small business may require an environmental management system to help conduct its waste removal operations, such as Environ-Mark). Third, the student must be able to find organizations for the business that could help increase its sustainability. These may include any available sustainable business networks, such as The New York Business Council for Sustainable Development.

A small business owner must then establish how his employees could integrate sustainability into their tasks, designing new roles for each employee if necessary. All stakeholders should be made aware of such changes, and the business should encourage members in its supply chain to also make sustainable choices.

Measuring Sustainability Practices

Some common tools for measuring sustainability include: analyzing environmental results, economic results, and social results, and identifying sustainability impacts. When analyzing environmental results, some of the factors taken into consideration include the use of energy, natural resources, carbon emissions, and waste utilization. In the US, organizations have already started working on redesigning their products to be much friendlier to the environment, using less plastic, less packaging materials, and employing new manufacturing processes. This new trend commenced just after the US government initiated several incentive programs to award businesses that remained environmentally conscientious. When measuring its economic sustainability (in terms of benefiting its local economy), a business must look at how much it spends on local suppliers, or assess the financial implications of its activities, particularly towards climate change. Management also has to evaluate its standard entry-level wage and compare it to the minimum wage. When measuring social sustainability, a business must review its contributions towards the community in which it operates, its employees' health and safety, its stakeholders' trust, as well as time and money donated towards community service projects (Goodland, 2007).

In most small businesses, the impacts of their sustainability measures is apparent, and directly felt by the local community; for example, a cab driver reducing his carbon emissions by ordering a fleet of hybrid vehicles, and ensuring customer safety by enforcing stricter seatbelt regulations for his passengers (Hodgson, 2009). It is important for a business to understand its key impacts so that it can recognize where to concentrate its sustainability initiatives. To evaluate the level of impact of its sustainability measures, a small business must look to the contentment of its stakeholders, and must have sufficient technical information, such as environmental reviews and potential sustainable development issues reported by the local community.

Sustainable Business Practice Networks

A sustainable business practice network assists organizations in creating a strategic plan for a more sustainable business environment. The network is usually composed of several

businesses that collaborate with one other to support their sustainable business practices. Such businesses are usually in the same supply chain, and the structure of the network is designed in a manner that encourages most small businesses to foster innovative ideas that may assist in reaching sustainable goals (Flanagan, 2007). A typical network is divided into different groups depending on their contributions, and each group is responsible for the development of strategies and goals for a specific area of the overall sustainability plan. The plan is later submitted before the network's oversight committee for review, and then submitted to an executive committee where it is considered for adoption into the network's sustainability development policies (Gajdzk, 2010).

Each business within a network is expected to discuss, evaluate and engage in the network's goal setting process. Businesses are expected to participate in the development of one another's vision and mission statements, and to support goals that may guide the activities and actions of the network. All decisions made within the network are well documented, which helps in connecting it to other similar groups within the region (Goodland, 2007). Such sustainable practice networks are significant since they assist in identifying any environmental, social or economic issues affecting the businesses. They also allow small businesses to develop new policy changes that are geared toward sustainability, and to eliminate any uncertainties associated with meeting organizational goals.

Sustainable Business Development

According to researchers, small businesses are usually disadvantaged when recruiting qualified employees. However, they can attract creative and talented people by offering a workplace that is more sustainable in terms of employee participatory and management systems (Hodgson, 2009). Therefore, it is extremely important for small businesses to implement a sustainable business development plan, whose first step is to create an internal consistency within the business (in terms of employee communication). According to most researchers, the best plans for a business are meaningless if they are only reserved in one person's mind, or not communicated effectively among the workforce. Therefore, changing the business's overall culture and outlook requires contribution from every employee.

To ensure this internal consistency is maintained, the business must prepare a vision and mission statement, clearly defining its goals and operating principles towards sustainability. The business will also have to measure and report all of its progress in the implementation process of the sustainability development plan, while establishing an external credibility with its clients, investors and suppliers (Kolleck, 2010). Communicating clearly with stakeholders on the company's progress will help smooth the company's transition into a more sustainable business. A small business may establish external credibility through publication of its annual sustainable development reports. Therefore, the business should make a commitment towards community developments efforts, as well as accessible public reports.

Resources for Sustainable Business Practices

After a small business has developed a sufficient level of sustainability internally, it must then consider its operations' impacts on the environment. For example, in dealing with issues regarding air pollution, a small business may consider employing technology that is energy efficient (Moreli, 2009), because qualified products from the manufacturer usually assist in

reducing emissions from power plants. Small businesses could use on-site sources of renewable energy, which may also be cost-effective in the long run.

More established businesses are focusing on the development of “green” buildings. These construction projects are designed to save energy by cutting the amount of material used, employing renewable resources such as timber, and utilizing natural energy to heat and cool the interior of the building being built. Smaller businesses have also opted to reign in their paper usage. Paper manufacturers consume excessive amounts of energy each year in the production of paper, so saving on the amount of paper used offers a significant cut in the use of natural resources per business (Nations, Ensuring Environmental Sustainability, 2013). Small businesses now opt to use digital gadgets such as smart phones or tablet PCs in place of paper.

Three Dimensions of Sustainability among Small Businesses

There are three main dimensions of sustainability among small businesses, which include: the environmental dimension, the economical dimension, and the social dimension. The environmental dimension focuses on maintaining healthy ecosystems. Small businesses have to provide their products and services in a manner that minimizes any negative impact to the ecosystem through effective environmental management programs.

The awareness of the need to preserve water started only recently, after half of the world’s wetlands experienced a dramatic drop in water levels. Most multinational companies are now placing an improved water management system within their buildings.

The economic dimension relates to sustainability measures that keep organizations from diminishing the world’s levels of consumption, utility and wealth. According to a recent report by the UNEP, a sustainable economy is one that improves the wellbeing of human beings and promotes social equity. Such an economy would significantly reduce environmental risk and ecological scarcities since it works to minimize the excessive depletion of natural resources (Owens, 2010). A sustainable economic dimension not only increases the wealth of the general population, it also increases the GDP growth of countries. In the transition of a more sustainable economic system, small businesses are able to exploit opportunities, thus creating new jobs.

According to historical records, there has been a very close relationship between economic growth and environmental degradation: as the community grows, natural resources grow scarcer. The increased human population, economic growth and the current environmental indicators may demonstrate this trend.

The social dimension focuses on sustainability issues that are mainly expressed through ethical employment measures, although it also deals with international and national laws on consumerism. Social disruptions such as war and political corruption play a major role in diverting much needed resources, affecting the wellbeing of humans and their society. One of the major ways small businesses can achieve social sustainability is through the alleviation of poverty, which also constitutes a significant factor in environmental degradation. Another approach to a more sustainable society is addressing the issues concerning human settlements. Most of the world’s small-scale transition towns and rural villages try to create a self-reliant community based on principles of simple living. This kind of life focuses on self-efficiency, especially in food production.

Student-Applied Sustainability in Practice

Over a period of four years, students partnered with a local Sam's Club and other small businesses to develop environmentally sustainable enterprises. Students performed energy audits at these SMEs to incorporate environmental sustainability practices while improving their financial efficiency. Students researched the materials needed to accomplish their goals using the best products and prices from suppliers, which in turn led to the best return on investment, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix). The areas of the environmental sustainability project's focus included: waste and recycling, energy and water, and people and community.

This experiment highlighted how well university/corporate/small businesses can partner together to achieve a more sustainable business environment (see Table 2 (Appendix) for business owner feedback of the project). It also provided students with practical experience, giving them the opportunity to feel the pressures and responsibilities that cannot be taught in a classroom. The students were responsible for making their SME's financially sustainable, and they reported their presentation directly to the Sam's Club President.

OUR PROCESS

1. Environmental Audit
2. Water Audit
3. Energy Audit (Gas and Electric Use)

Document with:

- Past Energy Bills, Water Bills, Electric Bill
- Return on Investment Analysis (ROI)

This presentation concentrated on the experiences of a student-led experiential engagement exercise with SMEs. The goal was to inspire sustainable practices in the lives of business members and their businesses, as well as with their customers and communities in the following areas:

Project Areas of Focus

Waste & Recycling

- Reduce waste
- Re-use materials
- Incorporate recycling

Nature & Natural Resources

- Incorporate practices or products that are environmentally certified by a third party
- Utilize environmentally preferred chemicals, ingredients, materials, mechanisms, or processes during normal course of doing business

Energy and Water

- Utilize renewable energy
- Incorporate energy, water, or other resource conservation practices, systems, or products

People & Community

- Utilize practices or products that are socially certified by a third party
- Incorporate safer ingredients in the end product to consumers
- Inspire the general public to act more sustainably

Each year teams were named to compete for National Honors. One member from each of the five finalist project teams, their SIFE Sam Walton Fellow, and their sponsoring Sam's Club Associate were invited to the Sam's Club home office in Bentonville, Arkansas on Earth Day for the competition. In Bentonville, the SIFE team representative gave a presentation on his team's project to Sam's Club President & CEO Brian Cornell and the Senior Executive team.

The trip also included a "Meet & Greet" with Sam's Club Executives, a tour of their corporate facilities, and a talk on their local environmental initiatives with the Northwest Arkansas area. The student-led team for this institution received the award two years in a row and was nominated for the award again in 2011.

Yearly Project Biographies

Year 1 (Bill's Restaurant and Skin's Hot Dogs)

What the team did:

- Installed three motion sensor paper towel dispensers; included 60 rolls of recycled paper towels to reduce waste product
- Changed three air filters to provide cleaner allergen protection with longer filter longevity
- Attached four door sweeps to all exterior doors to ensure ventilation security
- Replaced ten 40-watt bulbs with energy efficient bulbs in both restrooms
- Installed motion sensor lighting to the restrooms
- Replaced seventy-six 60-watt bulbs with energy-efficient light bulbs
- Replaced fluorescent lights with forty-eight energy-efficient fluorescent lights
- Replaced eight 100-watt bulbs with energy efficient bulbs
- Placed certificate on front of restaurant documenting environmental sustainability efforts
- Contributed to a more environmentally efficient facility
- Provided outreach programs with materials to facilitate throughout the community, in locations such as Boulevard Baptist Church

Lessons learned

The team was not selected as a finalist. There was a mistake in the voting and the team were called back and accepted as a final competitor, which meant that the team was allowed to present. The team presented so well, it won the overall championship.

There were a few mistakes made during the presentation. For example, the movie froze, although no one knew it had frozen except the presenter. The team also used the incorrect Sam's Club logo for the presentation slides. It was caught by one of the Sam's Club employees during the practice session and the team updated it.

Year 2 (Pompous Pig BBQ and Anderson Interfaith Ministries)

What the team did:

- Installed three motion sensor paper towel dispensers
- Changed five air filters to provide cleaner allergen protection with longer filter longevity
- Attached seven door sweeps to all exterior doors to ensure ventilation security
- Replaced ten 40-watt bulbs with energy efficient bulbs in both restrooms

- Installed motion sensor lighting to the restrooms
- Replaced seventy-six 60-watt bulbs with energy-efficient light bulbs
- Replaced eight 100-watt bulbs with energy efficient bulbs
- Replaced fluorescent lights with forty-eight energy-efficient fluorescent lights

Lessons learned

There were a few unique attributes to this project. For example, Anderson Interfaith Ministry was the first non-profit business that was used in the competition. Also, the team was able to complete the changes in two of four buildings, which allowed the team to monitor the other two buildings as a control group. The results were compared between the groups and the weather was removed from the calculations.

The South Carolina Hospitality Association developed a checklist for awarding green palmetto trees to environmentally friendly restaurants and hotels. The team used this checklist for the Pompous Pig BBQ and qualified them for one green palmetto tree.

The team was also going to help a small guitar store, the Fifth String Guitar Store. When the team started to take apart some of the wiring and replace the light switches it was discovered that the wiring did not meet the electrical code and was old and deteriorating. The team stopped work and notified the owner.

Year 3 (Shear Transitions Beauty Salon and Simpson Place)

What the team did:

- Insulated water pipes
- Installed water heater jacket
- Conducted weather stripping

Lessons learned

The idea for creating the only certified “green” hair salon was a great one, inspired from a TV show on PBS. Interestingly, after researching and ordering organic, green hair products, the team was inundated by emails for these products.

The highlight of the presentation, though, was the solar motion activated safety light in the rear parking lot. The building’s occupants were extremely appreciative of this installation.

The students broke a few ballasts while replacing some of the lights, and the team had to pay for the replacement. The plumber was thought to be doing the work for free, but the bill was received a week later.

Year 4 (Nature’s Corner Florist)

What the team did:

- Fixed leaky faucet
- Adjusted plumbing in toilet
- Turned off unused water heater
- Painted reflective/high-gloss paint on ceiling
- Maximized light reflectivity

- Eco-friendly light bulbs
- Facelift on the exterior

Lessons learned

The team used the yellow pages to determine the business type. With a brainstorming session, they decided to use old technology to find a lot of local businesses. It was determined that the flower industry was quite large and would have a big impact.

The students turned off the water heater in the building. It turned out that the business had never used hot water, but the water heater was using unnecessary energy for years.

The team also determined that the amount of water coming from a leaky faucet for one day provided enough water for a family of four for three months. The team measured the rate of water usage and determined that it was unbelievable. So we replaced the faucet set as the parts to fix it were not available.

The open sign was on 24 hours a day—no one bothered to turn it off, so the team installed a new, more efficient lighted open sign. This took the owner some time to get used to.

The florist shop turned out to be a member of an unbeneficial national online floristry service. Once the team changed the shop to a co-op flower delivery service, the owner saved \$16,000 per year.

CONCLUSION

This study observed the effects of student-applied sustainability practices on several small businesses, in an attempt to determine how feasible it would be to convert such businesses into sustainable enterprises—economically, environmentally, and socially. Over the course of four years, students found that it is in fact quite manageable to achieve sustainability, and that such collaborative process could save small businesses thousands of dollars in the long run.

All organizations have an obligation to work in a sustainable manner, whether it is through cleaner manufacturing methods, initiating social programs to benefit the community, or applying ethical working conditions for employees. This study found that achieving such sustainability can directly benefit the business financially, while providing a cleaner, brighter future for the community in which it operates.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Savings and Sustainability Effects for Each Small Business

	Bill's Restaurant	Skin's Hot Dogs	Pompous Pig BBQ	Anderson Interfaith Ministries	Shear Transitions	Nature's Corner
Electric (reduction in power bill)	12.5% 1st month	8.125% 1st month	22.51% 3 months	33% 3 months	15.7% 1 st month	25% 1 st month
Annual Projected Savings	\$800-\$1,000	\$350-\$500	\$934.64	\$3,679.20	\$695	No Measure
KWH saved	800KWH	345KWH	2,370KWH	685KWH	695KWH	472KWH
Savings over life of the materials	\$3,052.96	\$1,792.40	\$3,052.96	\$3,969.24	No Measure	No Measure
ROI	33.4%	32.53%	29.28%	17.9%	No Measure	No Measure
Future value of material (7 years)	\$1,706.35	\$721.11	\$7,615	\$2,033.68	No Measure	No Measure
Water (gallons saved 1 st month)	No Measure	No Measure	No Measure	No Measure	1,232	1,216

Table 2. Qualitative Measures and Feedback from Each Business

Bill’s Restaurant	Skin’s Hot Dogs	Pompous Pig BBQ	Anderson Interfaith Ministries	Shear Transitions	Nature’s Corner
90% of customers had a more positive feeling towards Bill’s due to the environmental sustainability efforts	80% of customers had a more positive feeling towards Skins’ due to the environmental sustainability efforts	73% of customers had a more positive feeling towards Pompous Pig due to the environmental sustainability efforts	91% of customers had a more positive feeling towards Anderson Interfaith Ministries due to the environmental sustainability efforts	100% of customers had a positive feeling towards Shear Transitions due to the environmental sustainability efforts	No Measures
90% of customers noticed the implementations of the environmentally friendly materials	90% of customers noticed the implementations of the environmentally friendly materials	73% of customers noticed the implementations of the environmentally friendly materials	91% of customers noticed the implementations of the environmentally friendly materials	72% of customers are likely to implement green practices in their own lives as a result of the environmental sustainability efforts	No Measures
“I would like to thank Sam’s Club with their donation of the grant money to help purchase materials to help turn me green!” – Bill Forrest, owner of Bill’s Restaurant	“I can’t believe how much money we saved with just the lighting!” – Matt Thrasher, co-owner of Skins’ Hot Dogs	“Thank you Sam’s Club and the Anderson University SIFE team for making this Green Palmetto Tree award possible” – Chet, owner, Pompous Pig Restaurant	“Thank you Sam’s Club and the SIFE team, the number of families in the community that will be helped is tremendous.” – Vernita Boone, Coordinator of AIM	“I cannot thank you enough for what you did at my office. The tenants simply love the solar flood lighting the rear parking area!” – Ann Simpson, Owner of Simpson Place Complex	“I saw my gas bill go down after the SIFE team fixed a gap at the top of my showroom window.” – Brenda Berry, Owner Nature’s Corner Florist