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How to Develop a Small Business Sustainability Plan

If you're a small business owner, you may be wondering what you'll gain by adopting a small business sustainability plan. In a word, plenty! Regardless of your industry, adopting sustainable business practices can improve your bottom line—in both the traditional and the environmental sense.

Your cost savings, reduced risk, positive brand association, improvements to the environment and public health, and ability to meet demands for eco-conscious products and services will more than offset the costs of up-front integration of sustainability initiatives. In other words, your small business sustainability plan's initial costs are a wise investment!



What Is a Business Sustainability Plan?

A business sustainability plan is simply something an organization develops to achieve goals that create financial, societal and environmental sustainability. A business impacts communities and resources, so taking these steps to sustainability is in the best interests of the environment, the business owner and the consumer.

Reasons to Build a Sustainable Business

Making the case for a sustainable business is simple: an environmentally friendly business can be a profitable one. You can decrease your business's negative impact on the environment *and* potentially save money. Just take it from the many [companies around the world](#) that generate at least \$1 billion a year in revenue from sustainable products or services. These companies manufacture everything from burritos to sports cars. Collectively, these businesses [generate more than \\$100 billion](#) in annual revenue from their green product lines alone, and they can outperform competitors by nearly 12 percent annually.

Small businesses can easily scale these practices and implement them in their own organizations through a small business sustainability plan. From saving money and promoting public health to improving public relations, the benefits of building a sustainable business might surprise you.

Benefits of a Small Business Sustainability Plan

- **Reduce energy use.** From installing ENERGY STAR products and appliances to using LED light bulbs and automatic taps, if you reduce waste, you will increase your business's efficiency, potentially save money on energy and contribute to overall small business sustainability. You can even start small: [encourage employees in energy-saving practices](#) such as turning off lights, carpooling, or telecommuting whenever possible.
- **Improve public health.** Be committed to going beyond mere compliance with baseline government standards. A sustainable business will implement changes that reduce emissions, improve air quality, and identify products that reduce concerns about health and safety liability. This promotes higher standards of public health and environmental protection.
- **Be a trailblazer.** Not too long ago, no one thought a sustainable business could also be a profitable one, so many industries still lack sustainable companies. Become an inspiring voice of advocacy beyond the four walls of your organization, and blaze trails by creating value for

employees, consumers and the public. The visionary thinking and passion behind your business sustainability plan will be remembered—and will yield dividends—for years to come.

- **Attract green-conscious consumers—and publicity.** Improve public relations with your sustainable business by becoming attractive to Earth-conscious consumers and raising your brand's value. And remember to let the public know when you implement your environmentally friendly policies. Learn more about the [benefits of running an environmentally friendly business here!](#)

5 Steps to Sustainability for a Small Business

If you're ready to develop your small business sustainability plan, we're here to help! With these five steps to sustainability based on [going above and beyond mere regulatory compliance](#), you'll be equipped to make your business more up to date and efficient. The result will be rewards for both the environment and your bottom line.

Step 1



Step 1: Learn about Sustainability

The first step in creating a small business sustainability plan is learning what, exactly, sustainability is all about.

- **Knowledge is power.** Use your resources wisely! There are many [guides](#) out there that offer suggestions on sustainability as well as renewable and sustainable energy. Use them as a jumping-off point.
- **Profits, people and planet.** Internalize the idea that sustainability within your business means managing your triple bottom line: your financial, social and environmental impacts, obligations and opportunities.
- **Going green vs. going sustainable.** You may be wondering, what is a green business? Green products and services directly reduce the environmental impact when compared to other products and services— sustainability is a broader concept. It's about the long-term, multifaceted impacts and implications of your products and services. But you can use green language in your small business sustainability plan and campaign using green goals to measure your total sustainability success.
- **Out with the old (way of thinking).** [Forget the outdated](#) “take-make-waste” worldview, and adopt the “borrow-use-return” model. It's all about a perspective shift. The key is to see the business, the self, the economy and the household as connected with—instead of separate from—the environment.

Step 2



Step 2: Assess Areas of Improvement

If the federal government and major corporations can find ways to improve sustainability, so can your small business! It just takes some research.

- **Learn the laws.** From local development laws to self-regulation in your industry to international treaties, many standards are already on the books in terms of sustainable practices. The Environmental Protection Agency's website is a great place to start in your research.
- **Check your compliance.** At a minimum, your business should be in total compliance with any laws or standards already in place. Research cost-effective ways to improve compliance, such as through pollution-prevention techniques and innovation.
- **Assess global issues.** Research issues such as global warming, energy and fuel crises, and ecosystem decline to see whether your practices are a contributing factor. This will guide what small business sustainability goals you set in terms of improvement.

Step 3



Step 3: Find Opportunities

Start embracing the entrepreneurial spirit of innovation and asking yourself the hard questions: check out these opportunities for creating the best small business sustainability plan possible.

- **Innovate.** Success in implementing sustainable business practices is directly related to innovation. If you want to meaningfully reduce waste and energy consumption, you'll need to innovate, whether you're a start-up or a thriving business. From problem solving to finding cheaper and better ways of doing things, innovation ranges from simple changes to implementation of complex new technologies.
- **Get employee input.** Bring in employee ideas and support; employees will take responsibility for things like energy efficiency and come up with solutions that will help you implement and improve sustainability.
- **Self-reflect.** Ask yourself a few questions, and you'll find numerous opportunities for improvement: What strengths does my business bring to the table that can play a unique role in sustainability? Does my company create an overabundance of waste? Do the companies I work with create mass amounts of waste?

Step 4



Step 4: Create a Vision

Your vision for sustainability is all about what makes you and your business tick.

- **Find your company's passion.** What is your company passionate about? Choose from a few environmental issues (e.g., global warming, air pollution, waste disposal, water pollution, urban sprawl), and focus on where you can have a meaningful impact.
- **Be specific about your small business's vision.** Create a separate vision for each section of your small business, from those on the front lines to those working behind the scenes in different departments.
- **Define your sustainability model's terms.** Be sure to define a few words that describe your business's specific sustainability model. This will help you give your employees the ability to take ownership of your overall vision.

Step 5



Step 5: Implement Changes

The final of the five steps to sustainability is an exciting one. Implementation!

- **Communicate clearly.** Adequately communicate your new sustainability plan across your entire company. Educate your employees to ensure successful implementation, and make sure all leaders are involved.
- **Change policies.** Ensure your current policies align with your sustainability plan. If not, create new ones that are specific to different departments and employees.
- **Review performance.** Create specific, measurable and attainable written goals, and develop metrics on how to track the success of your changes. This could be as simple as comparing a previous energy bill under the old policies with a new one that comes after you've implemented changes.
- **Get feedback.** Have your leaders in the company report back to you on any difficulties they encounter in implementing changes to policies, so that you can troubleshoot how to fix them while still staying true to the sustainability model. This will help you identify opportunities for more small business sustainability.

After you've taken the five steps to sustainability, make sure you can substantiate your sustainability claims before going public with the environmental advantages of your products or services. You can avoid making unqualified claims by following the Federal Trade Commission's [guidelines](#) and general principles that apply to environmental marketing. You'll learn how consumers will interpret your claims and how to support and qualify your claims without being misleading. Then you'll be ready to let people know about your small business sustainability plan. The financial, societal, environmental and public relations rewards are sure to follow!

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