

Companies find a competitive green edge

A business environmental mentoring program is showing that 'going green' can win customers and profits **BY ROBIN TAYLOR**

YARRA VALLEY NURSERYMAN David Van Berkel was annoyed that people passing his stand at garden shows would take his company brochures but leave behind his plastic showbag. So he came up with an innovative solution – he asked his supplier to put a perforated strip across the bottom of the bag, which customers could tear off to turn the bag into a tree guard. People now happily accept the plastic carrier. It's useful to them and becomes a marketing tool for the nursery.

It's a subtle piece of creative thinking, which Mr Van Berkel attributes to his participation in the Business Transformer Program, run by the National Centre for Sustainability at Swinburne University of Technology.

He is one of a growing number of business owners and operators who have completed the centre's program set up to help companies develop more environmentally sustainable practices. Mr Van Berkel participated in a 12-month program run in collaboration with the Shire of Yarra Ranges (see accompanying story).

The centre's team leader for business and community sustainability, Scott McKenry, says the program is designed to encourage business owners to think differently about their products and services; how they are offered, and how they can be future-proofed through sustainable growth strategies.

David Van Berkel of Garden Express.

“We take businesses out of their operational headspace,” he says.

While the centre’s core business is education, it also develops and delivers community and business programs in collaboration with industry, local councils and communities, which is how the Business Transformer Program started. The program, which began in 2006, was originally funded by Sustainability Victoria and the Victorian Environment Protection Authority.

In its first year a number of large organisations such as Pilkington Glass (now Viridian), Huntsman Chemicals and the City of Melbourne participated in the program. Mr McKenry says a notable outcome of that first program was that Pilkington Glass was able to secure multi-million-dollar funding from Sustainability Victoria to build a new manufacturing facility to make ‘comfort glass’, which is used in buildings to achieve a five-star energy rating.

The Business Transformer Program operates with local councils within a particular geographical area to encourage businesses to work together. Twelve businesses participated in the Yarra Ranges program.

Mr McKenry says the council identified businesses that were looking for support to minimise natural resource use, reduce waste and greenhouse gas emissions, and engage more effectively, from an environmental and commercial perspective, with their local communities.

The Yarra Ranges businesses, which ranged from a winery to a company producing cable and antenna systems, showed that improved environmental performance can clearly be good business. Over the program’s 12 months the businesses recorded average cuts in energy consumption of 8 to 10 per cent. This represented a \$100,000 saving in energy bills and a reduction of about 1800 tonnes in carbon dioxide emissions.

This result was achieved by each business running (with the centre’s help) its own project – for example, working with its supply chain to reduce packaging, improve efficiency or implementing a behaviour-change program for customers or staff.

The program includes seminars covering people’s own business case for sustainability and stakeholder engagement and these are supplemented by in-house workshops on themes like behaviour change, carbon management, energy efficiency, water efficiency and project planning.

Advisers from the centre also visit businesses to help build some of the benchmarks for measuring progress in areas such as energy and water use and waste.

The Business Transformer Program

stays abreast of international trends and developments through the participation of a Canadian business sustainability expert, Dr Bob Willard.

Dr Willard says the program’s distinguishing characteristic is the opportunity it gives participants to apply what they learn to a real initiative in their organisation. “Because the program takes a year to complete, they have a chance to roll up their sleeves, apply their knowledge, and learn from their successes and challenges and those of other participants,” he says. “This helps people become more effective leaders of subsequent projects.”

From his international perspective, Dr Willard says Australian businesses tend to work more cooperatively with government on sustainability issues than businesses in other countries. “I also sense that Australian business leaders are more open to good ideas from elsewhere and are not as inhibited by the NIH (‘not invented here’) factor. That’s refreshing.”

In 2008 businesses in the City of Casey took part in a shorter version of the transformer program, and in 2009 the City of Knox (both are Melbourne municipalities) is also partnering a program for businesses in its area.

Mr McKenry says the program is modular and can be set up and run as required for a particular council. In response to industry input, the program now includes more content on issues related to climate change and carbon accounting.

Businesses pay a fee, on a sliding scale according to their size, to participate. The cost ranges from \$1500 for companies with fewer than 100 employees, to \$3000 for businesses with 100 to 300 employees, and a negotiable rate for larger companies.

Mr McKenry says that while the programs to date have all been run by Swinburne in Victoria, there is potential to run them in other states through the centre’s collaborative network. ■

The National Centre for Sustainability is a collaboration of several institutions across Australia: Swinburne University of Technology (Victoria), Sunraysia Institute of TAFE (Victoria), University of Ballarat (Victoria), South West Institute of TAFE (Victoria), Challenger TAFE (Western Australia) and Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE.

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CASE STUDY

Business blooms from an unexpected marketing edge

For Garden Express owner David Van Berkel, being involved in the Business Transformer Program provided a fresh perspective on opportunities, which he says he would otherwise not have thought of, for marketing his company’s green credentials.

Garden Express is a mail order and online garden centre. It publishes a catalogue five times a year and also produces wholesale flower bulbs for the nursery industry.

Mr Van Berkel says he started the course just focused on recycling and energy savings and only as the course progressed did he realise that these could also create marketing opportunities.

“I became aware that we needed to produce a more environmentally friendly package and market that to our customers,” he says. “The best thing for me was to use the power of my catalogues and database to tell my customers what we were doing to become green.”

He says the quickest and easiest change the company made was reducing energy use in the workplace. Simply by educating staff about the potential savings to be gained by turning off unused equipment, the company was able to reduce energy consumption by about 10 per cent, at no cost, and Mr Van Berkel regards that as just the start.

He said the program showed people how these sorts of changes could improve their business, and even if the change did not result directly in additional profit it created a stronger relationship with customers through being seen to be “doing the right thing”.

He says another gain from the program was the network it created with other businesses in the shire: “A cable production company is completely different to a flower bulb company but, at the end of the day, if you run a machine you are in the same business of using resources.”



Carbon accountants queue for accreditation

In keeping with the political momentum building behind a national carbon trading scheme, Swinburne’s National Centre for Sustainability has been inundated with demand for its course in carbon accounting. Since introducing the course (Australia’s first accredited carbon accounting course) in May 2008, a steady stream of budding carbon accountants have signed up to become accredited.

A significant part of the centre’s work in the past few years has been developing greenhouse gas management strategies for businesses. Scott McKenry says this work often involves partnering with the country’s foremost experts in the field, who now act as course facilitators.

“We haven’t even marketed the course and every intake has been full,” he says.

Last year, eight groups of 16 participants completed the course and this year another 14 groups of 16 are scheduled to take part.

“There are a lot of consultants who want accreditation, as well as people from emissions-intensive industries and local councils, many of which will have potential liabilities under an emissions trading scheme,” Mr McKenry says.

The hands-on course requires participants to carry out carbon accounting in their workplace and provide evidence to show they can develop an emissions inventory and report.

More information

■ www.swinburne.edu.au/ncs/Education/CarbonAcc.html