

Sustainable Advocacy: DEFINING GOALS and WORKING TOGETHER



By Barbara Wichmann

Sustainable advocacy is a term that lends itself to a number of interpretations and is used in a variety of ways by corporations and small businesses. For one, it has been used to refer to sustainable customer acquisition, in which businesses leverage customer advocates to generate more customers and drive the brand. More frequently, though, it is associated with programs that share a common goal, namely to improve health and well being of customers, employees, and communities, and reduce the overall negative environmental impact.

Large enterprises as well as small businesses are implementing and advocating for long-term sustainability programs and are driven by the shared belief that the advantages of corporate social responsibility (CSR) benefit not just business, but the world at large. In fact, the 19th Annual Global CEO Survey notes that out of the 1,400 company leaders from 83 countries involved in the report, “64 percent say that corporate social responsibility is core to their business rather than being a stand-alone programme”.

The recently increased emphasis on sustainability advocacy in business originates, in part, with the **United Nations Division of Sustainable Development** (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>). This agenda was adopted by many world governments in September 2015 and revitalized the Triple Bottom Line with a new plan of action for People, Planet, and Prosperity. Most notably, the plan sets 17 sustainable development goals for the year 2030, as well as action plans to achieve the goals.

The Division for Sustainable Development program offers great assistance and resources; a case in point is the The Goal 16 Advocacy Toolkit. This toolkit is aimed at national advocacy initiatives, yet it represents invaluable support for teams that are looking to expand or create their own CSR and advocacy programs. (A link to the toolkit can be found in the sources of this article)

Additionally, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can utilize larger networks to diversify and

empower their sustainability initiatives. For example, Forbes found that SMEs are often a part of value chains where large companies are “demanding attention by suppliers to sustainability metrics and performance”. These companies are interested in doing business with suppliers that advocate for sustainability. Moreover, SMEs and larger companies share similar goals, including decreasing risk and increasing opportunities for growth. For SMEs that are not currently involved in sustainable advocacy, the positive

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potential impact is unprecedented; especially considering that small business makes up 99.7 percent of all U.S. business.

Sustainable advocacy that engages with government organizations and initiatives is one of the most effective ways to drive real measurable change quickly; In fact, according to the UN Global Compact-Accenture Strategy CEO Study 2016, 85 percent of CEOs “see cross-sector coalitions and partnerships as essential to accelerating transformation.” Businesses are not limited to government programs, however, and substantial change is seen when companies utilize goal-oriented CSR programs for their own

companies.

To illustrate, **Kati Ihamaki**, the head of sustainability at **Finnair**, was quoted in a recent Forbes article saying, “We’ll see more corporations mapping the UN [sustainable development goals] to their operations and values, asking themselves: ‘Are we fit for the future? Can we help to provide solutions to these worldwide issues?’ It will be even more vital for companies to work together with state agencies and [non-governmental organizations] to create value, and business opportunities that drive long-term, scalable value creation.”

While large companies have the resources, numbers, and connections to engage and enact change, small companies usually have limited resources and, as a result, many companies ask: what can a small business enterprise do to make a positive impact?

Whether you are working in corporate sustainability, a value-driven small business, or are just looking into ways that your company can achieve sustainable goals and bring value to your business, sustainable advocacy will continue to be an increasingly significant aspect of business due to its wide reaching positive effects.

As a women’s business enterprise and ISO 14001 certified company, sustainable advocacy has been at the crux of our mission from day one and we continue to do our small part. Should you have any questions about CSR programs, outreach campaigns, or consulting advice from a company that has been involved with sustainability, give us a call. ◆

SOURCES:

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