



Making Sustainability Make Cents

Speaking the language of business when promoting sustainable design

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Most of us learn a few essential words or phrases when travelling in foreign lands. It's also good practice to learn some vocabulary when selling sustainable design services and products.

Sustainability is not just a buzz word. It's a strategic direction that supports fundamental business practice. Speaking the language of business when presenting creative concepts can allow clients to understand the quantifiable, bottom line value our strategies offer.

Business-speak requires a focus on the principles of reduction, relevance, innovation and growth. Just like a

phrasebook, we hope these terms will help your client understand you better.

The first principle is **cost reduction**. Like most of us, organizations seek to make as much money as possible while spending as little as possible for what they need. If your sustainable design solutions reduce the costs of doing business, such as driving people to a website for information and service instead of calling their one person information desk, you are lowering operational costs while providing the added benefit of raising service levels. Perhaps your strategy will cost less to produce. Share with your client how your strategies reduce their costs and find ways to calculate and measure your strategies' effectiveness (i.e. number of attendees at an event, number of new memberships or number of products sold). Speak in numbers.

Risk reduction usually focuses on reducing the risk of lawsuits which can include heavy fines or penalties. The value of a company increases as risks are lowered so make yourself and your client aware of new legislation that may affect them. New sustainable packaging and printed paper practices are coming into effect in B.C. in 2014, for example. Let your client know that your recommendations are helping them reduce risk. They should be able to recognize this financial value as well as resource savings. Keep apprised of the latest legislation trends and know how to advise your clients. Communicate with your client on how they can lower their risk by understanding the evolution of the marketplace.

Innovation is another common business principle. Although short lived, it can keep a company relevant in the marketplace. A business survives for the long term through regularly innovating, positioning itself and demonstrating its ability to evolve with society and market demand. When you

ask a client to stand behind a brave new innovative idea, explain your efforts in positioning them as innovators who guide the marketplace, not those who follow.

Positioning is challenging for any business on an ongoing basis so every opportunity counts. Recommend complementary services with other professionals such as public relations and marketing to leverage your relevant and newsworthy approaches, improving an organization's positioning.

Reputation is driven by audience perception. When an organization continually demonstrates its commitment within the community and to the consumers of its goods and services, reputation is enhanced. Strategies that involve two-way communication models provide that opportunity to connect with consumers. Do your design solutions include a way for consumers to respond or give useful feedback for future innovations? When clients can evaluate how their audience sees them, they can respond more effectively.

Legitimacy involves understanding how an organization or business fits into today's world. Does a product or service or organization deserve our loyalty? This business term is directly connected to the values of the day. Today, when corporations are fair to employees, provide safe working environments, use sustainable production practices, and are transparent and accountable, investors and consumers feel they can make better buying decisions. If your client is doing good things, help them communicate that clearly to their customers to enhance their reputation and to legitimize their place in the market.

Growth Path and Trajectory are at times the least exciting principles for CEOs because it's difficult if not impossible to forecast an accurate future. Yet a business's long term health

is only secure when they can meet the needs of the next generation of stakeholders. Businesses that understand this proposition focus on listening to their clients.

Determine your client's growth trajectory and how they intend to reach it. The more you understand their long term goals, the more value you can provide. Create design strategies that include a shared vision to consumers and tools that allow them to respond to their needs.

As you translate design-speak into business-speak, make an effort to meet with decision makers whenever possible. Ask for background materials before your first meeting. Not all businesses have them but these roadmaps are extremely useful in understanding an operation's direction, focus and objectives. Request their communications plan (who they want to communicate with, and how) and their sustainability policy (the commitments they've made internally and externally). If your client doesn't have either of these ask if they have an operations plan (how they run their operation) and/or strategic plan (when and how they are growing their organization). Business objectives are important considerations when developing sustainable strategies and speaking with business leaders.

Sustainability is an unseen opportunity, a new business paradigm, and we've barely scratched the surface. Some designers hear "sustainability" and think creative restriction. Others believe that it's not their job to advise clients on how to undertake communication strategy. The reality is that designers are often the first out-of-house source that can help a company benefit in ways that go beyond selling an individual product, and use design as a communication function. Designers will change corporate and organizational

mindset when we learn to communicate effectively in the language of our clients, and that is the language of business.

RESOURCES

Books:

- The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability by Paul Hawken
- Cradle to Cradle by William McDonough and Michael Braungart
- Ants, Galileo and Gandhi: Designing the Future of Business through Nature, Genius and Compassion by Sissel A. Waage
- The Business Case for Sustainability by Bob Willard
- The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift by Andrew R. Edward
- The Natural Step for Business: Wealth, Ecology and The Evolutionary Corp. by Brian Nattrass & Mary Altomare
- Leading Change Toward Sustainability - A Change-Management Guide for Business, Govt & Civil Society by Bob Doppelt
- The New Sustainability Advantage by Bob Willard

Magazines:

corporateknights.ca, sustainmagazine.com,
business-ethics.com, ethicalperformance.com

Websites:

SustainAbility.com, CBSR.ca (Canadian Business for Social Responsibility), Ethicalcorp.com

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