

# VIEWPOINT: Business Sustainability Helps Save Planet, Jobs, Competitive Edge

SGIA News caught up with Eric Henry, president of TS Designs, Inc., to talk about his and his company's pioneering work in sustainability.

*SGIA News: What exactly is sustainability?*

**Eric:** Businesses have to meet three criteria to be considered sustainable:

- 1 They have to be aware and responsible for the impact they are making on the planet. Often, going for the cheapest option means that sometime in the future we will be accountable for increased waste and pollution. Down the road, we believe that the successful businesses will be those who minimize their negative impact on the planet.
- 2 They have to be responsible to people: employees, customers, suppliers, and the community in which they live and work. For example, if you go outside your market to purchase products your market can supply, you're not being sustainable — you are under serving your community. There is a cost to getting things cheaper, wanting them immediately. We all have a responsibility for keeping jobs in our country and our community, and our most powerful influence on this is when we spend money.
- 3 They have to find a way to be profitable. This can be a very difficult thing to do in a world that has come to value "cheaper is better."

So, businesses need to address the planet, people, and make a profit, developing a system to do all three things simultaneously. If you do the first two, people often just see that "you are more expensive" and miss the larger implications.

*SGIA News: Why does sustainability matter for companies? Why is it particularly important for US companies?*

**Eric:** The U.S. has one-fifth of the world's population yet uses 25 percent of its resources. If China mimics our example, and its population goes after big houses and two cars for every family, the world will not have enough resources to support all of us. We want to help countries develop, but yet are reluctant to admit there are not enough resources to support all of them in the style Americans have grown accustomed to living in. If we divert too much of our resources and attention to the short-term outlook, making money now regardless of how we do that, then the damage this will do to the planet will eventually lead to us running out of resources, running out of people to sell to, or us polluting ourselves out of existence. The way around these outcomes is to begin to take responsibility now for our actions. In the U.S., we need to set an example for other countries as they develop towards our model.

*SGIA News: How has TS Designs moved to become both sustainable and competitive?*

**Eric:** Ninety five percent of the customers we have today we did not have two years ago. We grew our business in a global market, spending 25 years working for the major brand names. Most of those now

have moved their work offshore in order to increase their wholesale margins. In a global market, we cannot compete on "cheapest." So we are creating a niche for ourselves using the sustainability model. Many companies are starting to see the value of sustainability, and they understand our story.

For example, we recently did T-shirts for the North Carolina Zoo for an Earth Day event. We used organic cotton T-shirts made in North Carolina, and printed them with our patented REHANCE® dye process — something we developed about eight years ago to be environmentally friendly, where the shirts are printed first and then garment dyed — it's an environmentally friendly process that allows for "speed to market" and inventory flexibility. In doing all this, we employ about 500 people in the North Carolina supply chain for T-shirts. That's a small example of how thinking about sustainability criteria can make a difference in any job you do.

We also believe that we need to demonstrate sustainability in as many areas as we can. We've started to make our own biodiesel fuel — my own car has only seen about 20 gallons of petroleum diesel in the last two years, but has traveled almost 30K miles. Our company already gets over 10% of its electrical energy from renewable resources so that we are not totally dependent on our local power company, which gets its power mostly from coal-fired power plants. By demonstrating alternatives, we help other people and companies think about what they can do.

In addition, I was asked to speak at Old Dominion University and their sustainability curriculum which is required for incoming freshman. This semester-long focus is the first important step, educating college students on their global responsibility and why it matters so much. Armed with this information, it is more likely that these students will make more "sustainable" decisions as they go through college and out into the workforce.

*SGIA News: How can other companies begin to investigate sustainability? What are the first steps they need to take?*

**Eric:** The first step is easy: be aware. Ask yourself important questions — where does your water come from and go to? Where does your energy come from?



Visit the Environmental Management Systems Service Center in the Environment Center at [SGIA.org/govt](http://SGIA.org/govt) for more information on environmental performance.

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# Simply the Best: DPI will Honor Digital Dynamos at SGIA '05

At this year's Friday Night Dinner Party (New Orleans, September 30), SGIA/DPI will present the first DPI Innovator Award, designed to recognize a person whose effect on digital imaging has been strong, significant and lasting.

"It's about the ingenuity inherent in digital imaging," said SGIA/DPI President Michael Robertson. "New developments in digital printing ripple through the marketplace, affecting everyone in the specialty imaging arena. The DPI Innovator Award will draw attention to the many creative and innovative people who move digital imaging — and the whole industry — forward."

Winners must work in a printing/imaging company or for a company that supplies materials, equipment and/or technical information to the industry, and must be nominated by an active SGIA/DPI member.

**Deadline for Nominations: June 15.**

More info: Dan Marx, DPI Director of Communications & Service Development (703.359.1312)

Your materials? Your fabric? Are there alternative sources for any or all of these things that are more sustainable? Where does your energy company get its energy? How environmentally friendly is that source? What can you do about getting energy from other sources if it isn't environmentally friendly?

Some of these are hard questions, some are easier. I usually start my talks on sustainability by asking everyone where the shirt they are wearing was made. Very few people can answer that question — but reading labels is the very first step. Are there ways to source your shirts locally, or to use friendlier materials? We don't buy many of our shirts from North Carolina yet, but we got about 150,000 organic cotton shirts last year from American Apparel based in Los Angeles, Ca. Each decision is a balancing act between making your company more sustainable and ensuring your business is profitable and can survive.

Another important point to remember is that there are a lot of environmental regulations out there to comply with, but being in compliance with these is NOT the same as being sustainable. At best, it is just the first basic step. No business is 100 percent sustainable, but we can all do better than we are doing. Recognizing the impact your business and your products and processes are having on the environment is the crucial first step to improving the impact you are having on the planet, on your local communities, and on the business environment.

Eric Henry, President of TS Designs, Inc., has lived in Burlington, North Carolina, for most of his life. He attended both N.C. State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but also could not contain his entrepreneurial spirit. While at UNC-CH, Eric was a member of the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity and started Creative Screen Designs, which sold screen printed apparel to the college market. Before the start of his senior year, Eric left to become a partner with Tom Sineath at T.S. Designs, Inc. In addition to his responsibilities at T.S. Designs, Eric devotes a lot of time to volunteer organizations. He serves on the board of SGIA, where he was the chairperson from 2001-2002. He is also on the Board of Advisors for the Martha & Spencer Love School of Business at Elon University, the Board of Advisors for the Elon University Center for Environmental Studies, and serves in an advisory capacity for DENR's Environmental Stewardship Initiative. In addition, Eric is a past board member of the Burlington Bicycle Advisory Board, Piedmont Land Conservancy the Alamance County Planning Board. He received the 2003 Governor's Conservation Achievement Award from NC Wildlife Federation. His latest endeavor is starting Local Action, LLC to develop resources from his local community of Alamance County — as part of this effort, he has set up a small batch processor for biodiesel fuel at TS Designs. Eric recently accepted a position of vice president with a start up biodiesel facility, Carolina Biodiesel that plans to produce 1-2 million of biodiesel in Orange County utilizing waste vegetable oil from surrounding counties.

For more information on Sustainability, e-mail Eric at [eric@tsdesigns.com](mailto:eric@tsdesigns.com) or reach him directly at 336.229.6426 x201



For the latest SGIA '05 information visit:

# www.sgia.org

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