

black

Going organic is a good first step, but here's the ecological and economic reasons to convert your enterprise to full sustainability.

The green revolution is starting to make more economic sense than ever, not only in consumer products such as hybrid cars and biodiesel fuels, but in the imprinted sportswear business as well.

Often, screen printers use the terms "organic" and "sustainable" interchangeably, but they are not exactly the same thing. Going organic is a huge first step toward a more sustainable operation, but there's a lot more to the movement than buying T-shirts made from organic cotton.

In this article, we'll examine how the green evolution is unfolding in our industry, what the economics are, and what it takes to move beyond using organic cotton and become more sustainable, not only in the decorating process, but in operating your physical plant and even in managing your employees. Hopefully, we will also show you how going green doesn't have to mean sacrifice, in fact, it can be the key to higher profit margins.

In other words, the technology has reached the point where you can do well and still do good by the environment.

WHAT'S WHAT

So what is the difference between organic and sustainable? Well, sustainability is not concerned only with the materials out of which your products are made, but the means by which the finished product and its materials are transported, produced, disposed of and stored.

Sustainability also comes into play with how you manage your consumption of resources for processes unrelated to production: utility usage for air conditioning, heat, lights, computers, machinery, restrooms and even cleaning processes.

Employee satisfaction and relations are also essential ingredients in the concept

of running a sustainable enterprise, in terms of their level of happiness with their tasks, the benefits you can offer them and the quality and safety of the work environment.

Finally, sustainability, at its core, also impacts the efficiency of your operations, not only production inputs and outputs, but also how effectively you communicate between and among your own staff and with your customers and potential customers.

So what, then, is a sustainable business model? How does it fit into this equation? A sustainable business model begins with a statement of purpose that cements your company's mission to pursue a sustainable ideal.

Our business, T.S. Designs in Burlington, N.C., is a custom and contract printed apparel supplier (see sidebar, page 24), and we have created a sustainable business model by focusing on what we call "The 3 P's: People, Profits and Planet."

The most common analogy used to describe The 3 P's is a three-legged stool. Without all three legs, the stool doesn't function. But when all three legs are sturdy, the stool can withstand great pressure. Realistically, while it is important to observe all three P's, many companies using this model focus their attack on a single ideal. T.S. Designs focuses on the planet part of the equation, which in turn builds people and profit in its wake.

WHERE TO START

Fellow screen printers often ask, "How can I obtain sustainability? How can I become sustainable without getting underbid by my competition?" The first step is to drop the preconceived notion that sustainability is all-or-nothing. Going green, to be infor-

By Eric Henry,
Contributing Writer

- 5 Star Golf Shirts, Inc.
- American Apparel
- Article.1
- AW Wholesalers
- Bella
- Boo-Z Warehouse
- Bryder Intl.
- Budget T-Shirt Co.
- Clipper Corporate Apparel
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- Cotton Connection Inc.
- ECOncious
- Friedman's Activewear
- M&O Knits
- Revedore Apparel Inc.
- Royal Apparel
- Shining Star
- SOS From Texas
- The Woolenwear Co.
- Tie Dyes by Rainbow Production
- Today's Trading Co. Inc.
- Unionwear.com
- Vertical Production
- W-Two Sportswear
- Wholesale Printables

ORGANIC GARMENT VENDORS

T.S. Designs focuses its resources on the planet side of the equation, which in turn builds the people and profit legs in its wake. Keep in mind that this is just one example among numerous sustainable business models. There is no perfect model, and you should craft one that best suits the needs of your self, your business, your employees and your customers.

Contact information for these companies is available in *IMPRESSIONS 2006 Sourcebook* (June 15, 2006), page 152. Also check page 220 for a listing of water-based ink suppliers.

mal about it, is not a final destination of absolute efficiency and perfect execution. If that were required, the idea of converting to become a sustainable enterprise would seem very daunting indeed.

The truth is there is no such thing as a 100% sustainable business; your goal should be to increase your level of sustainability compared to the history of your own and other businesses. What is important is that businesses take small steps toward becoming *more sustainable*. The building blocks of sustainability are awareness of impact and continuous improvement.

SO WHY DO IT?

Now that we've addressed what sustainability is, the more important question facing you is why.

Many view the sustainable business model as a pleasant ideal, but think it's just not practical in the real world. And, as a business tool, it doesn't amount to much more than a promotion tool for a niche market. This type of thinking is especially discouraging for decorators who want to add sustainability to their mission but also have to compete on a low-price platform.

When these decorators look at the sustainable businesses that are championed by the green community, it is easy to assume that sustainability is beyond their grasp. After all, these businesses getting all the press had to make huge investments and entirely alter their method of competition in order to become sustainable.

When I hear decorators talking about these kinds of obstacles, I encourage them to think of it another way. What is imperative to realize, I tell them, is that the effort to become more sustainable does not require a change in the way you compete.

I group all conversions to more sustainable processes into two categories: conversions that lower costs or offset their costs through better efficiency, and conversions that will force either lower margins or higher prices.

Converting to the use of organic, domestically-made fabric is certainly an example of the latter category. However, such extreme model changes are not necessary. Conversions resulting in lower or offset costs can be implemented by every decorating business, whether or not your mission includes the word "sustainable."

FIRST STEPS

Ask your utility supplier for a business energy audit; these are sometimes offered free and can be a great first step to finding and fixing energy waste in your office or



The men's and ladies' organic T-shirts from EONscious, Petaluma, Calif., are offered in short- and long-sleeve styles, and "green" colors such as earth, Pacific blue and rose.

Going Green

Chances are you're involved in the eco-friendly movement and might not even know it.

Major brands such as Starbucks (with organic beans) and General Electric (developing solar power systems) are making efforts toward more environmentally sustainable practices. Clothing distributors in corporate America are a growing sector of the green campaign. The number of vendors selling blank organic garments to apparel decorators grows each year (see vendor list on previous page), and one new all-organic supplier has just joined our industry.

Recently, Dale Denkensohn, Stefan Bergill and Steve Wagner launched EONscious, an environmentally sustainable apparel manufacturer in Petaluma, Calif.

"Sustainability and environmental stewardship are on a lot of people's minds," says Denkensohn, president. "Unlike previous little blips in the market, organic isn't a trend, it's a long-term commitment that companies are making." EONscious sources only certified organic fiber for its apparel. "People think that cotton is natural, but industrial grown cotton is anything but beneficial to the planet," Denkensohn adds.

T-shirts, hats, fleece, beanies and bags are among the products offered by this environmentally aware manufacturer. Check out EONscious' slate of 100% certifiable organic products at www.econscious.net.

WHY ORGANIC?

According to the Organic Trade Association (OTA), more than 60% of Americans purchase organic foods and beverages. As consumers become aware of the health and environmental risks associated with conventional farming practices, the demand for organic production for other goods and services has increased. Greater public knowledge of the ecological devastation caused by conventional cotton farming has been influencing consumers to choose organic fibers. The growth in the organic fiber industry reflects this greater awareness; the industry is expected to grow 44% over the next 5 years.

For more information, contact the Organic Trade Association, PO Box 547, Greenfield, MA 01302. Linda Lutz, Membership Manager, can be reached at 413-774-7511 ext. 19, or by fax at 413-774-6432, and by e-mail at llutz@ota.com. Or visit the association's Web site at www.ota.com.



Eric Henry's latest endeavor is a small-batch biodiesel processor at the T.S. Designs facility, where a local cooperative converts waste vegetable oil from local eateries. He is pictured here with his veggie-powered car in front of a field of wildflowers that are part of the landscaping at his facility.



Staff members at Frog's Leap Winery in Rutherford, Calif., wear and sell T.S. Designs shirts to Napa Valley tourists. The winery has a commitment to sustainable farming, and buys from T.S. Designs based on this shared principle.

T.S. Designs Rethinks T-Shirts

Back in the late '70s, Eric Henry left North Carolina State University to join his buddy Tom Sineath, who had a small

screen printing company called T.S. Designs Inc. The partners built the business for 15 years, landing major contracts for brands like Nike before NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) changed everything in the early '90s. "We just didn't get it. We didn't have an interest in becoming the low-cost producer," he says. "So we went back and said, 'Let's develop a technology that we control that has greater value.'"

By 1996, working with their friend Sam Moore at Burlington Chemical Co., they came up with not only a water-based ink, but also a type of discharge printing they called Rehance. It dramatically reduces the environmental impact of production and creates a finished garment with a perfectly smooth hand and a higher perceived value. Rehance shirts are completely breathable, won't shrink (because they're garment-dyed, not piece-dyed), can be ironed and last longer than plastisol-printed garments.

Unfortunately, the marketplace was underwhelmed, and T.S. Designs eventually downsized from 100 employees to 14.

During this period, Henry and Sineath refocused their business "on a vision that we feel will allow us to survive in the global textile market, although we'll never be the lowest cost producer," says Henry. "So while NAFTA has devastated the textile industry, we've established a position and direction that will allow us to stay around."

T.S. Designs' main business is in organic cotton garments made either in the U.S. or by a cooperative in Nicaragua. In a nod to the reality of the marketplace, T.S. Designs will special order conventional T-shirts made offshore if the customer desires.

"In our view, to go outside of your market for a product or service that your market can provide is not sustainable. Ideally, we'd like to go from organic cotton grown in North Carolina to a finished shirt in North Carolina," Henry says. "That's a big part of what sustainability is."

Sineath and Henry treat their Burlington, N.C. headquarters as a laboratory for sustainability. They take a comprehensive approach to minimize chemical, energy and material consumption. They also limit water usage, get part of their electricity from a solar array, and operate an organic co-op garden on property.

In November 2004, T.S. Designs won the Green Business Leader Award from Co-op America at the second annual Green Business Conference in San Francisco.

Now back to 30 employees, the company looks to the future with a pragmatic optimism. "We have to succeed," says Henry. "If we don't, people will conclude the only model that works is the Wal-Mart model."

— *Pride S. Wright, editor, Green Steps Journal, www.greensteps.org.*

plant. If you are a screen printer, review procedures for what is done with inks after a production run. Is that ink saved? How much goes down the drain when the screen is cleaned? Review your MSDS (material safety data sheets). It's entirely possible that some environmentally harmful chemicals could be replaced by equally or even less-expensive alternatives.

If you are an apparel manufacturer, how much of your plant is lit? Could workstation lighting reduce the amount of electricity you consume? What types of benefits do you offer employees? What range of benefits might you offer for approximately the same cost?

Instead of giving a \$300 gift card to Wal-Mart for a holiday bonus, offer a \$300 trust fund for employees' children. For a business owner who has never considered becoming more sustainable, the possibilities are endless.

WORTH THE EFFORT

Whatever your efforts, remember that continuous improvement is essential to the process of sustainability. Nike has received some positive publicity as a more sustainable enterprise because it announced that 6% of all its apparel is made of organic cotton.

Although the definition of sustainable manufacturing is certainly subjective, we believe that if you look beyond your local market to manufacture a product that your market is capable of producing, that's a less sustainable process. Nike, for instance, would be a more sustainable enterprise if it could bring more of its apparel production back to their target market.

MAKING GREEN PAY

Now the \$10,000 question: why attempt sustainable conversions that will lower margins or force higher prices? One of the arguments is that it is simply the right thing to do, even if the conversion requires substantial investment and upkeep. However, there are economic justifications. One of the most touted reasons for sustainable conversions is access to the growing niche market of the organic, domestically made movement.

This movement has exploded in recent years, as can be seen by the growing attendance at green trade shows and conventions. Offering this niche product will often raise costs, but you can charge a premium for the service, resulting in potentially higher margins.

Another common misconception accompanying this vein of thought is that

catering to this niche market will force a business to abandon its existing market. Even though T.S. Designs made a radical, sudden change toward sustainability, it took years to complete the transition from conventional, offshore-produced shirts printed with plastisol to what we have today, a business printing predominately domestic organic fabric and shirts with water-based inks. Even now, although we will always encourage our customers to switch to organic, domestic cotton and water-based inks, we gladly accept jobs for any printing within our capability.

One of the cardinal rules to any conversion is never walk away from any business you can't afford to lose. Never force the transition, and never push your customers too hard. At the same time, keep in mind there are many things you can do to make traditional printing jobs more sustainable without impacting your customer satisfaction.

TRUE COSTS

On the environmental side of the equation, it is also important to consider all the costs of the globalized sourcing network and non-green-friendly production processes. When T.S. Designs made the

transition, we turned to organic cotton because conventional cotton is the second most pesticide-laden crop in the world, behind only coffee. About 25% of the world's pesticides are used on cotton, and almost 1/2 lb. agricultural chemicals is required to grow the non-organic cotton in a typical T-shirt.

In looking at these numbers, we explored a couple of questions. What are all those pesticides doing to the local and regional ecosystems? Who pays for the consequences of ecosystem and land destruction?

Our current system does not allocate these costs to anyone, but eventually they will be paid in full. Mother Earth can be a fickle creditor. It may seem now that we can draw from her an infinite supply of natural resources, but eventually the price of our cheap clothing, food and fuel must be repaid, and that bill will come due with interest added.

Global warming is fast becoming a worldwide concern and has seen wide recognition in the scientific community in recent years. Even now, carbon tax programs are being explored to penalize heavy carbon expulsion into the atmosphere. How quickly will your business be

T.S. Designs a Vision, Values & Mission statement

"Our vision is to transform the world we live in, both in small and large measures alike. Creating economic, ecological and social prosperity while ensuring that future generations have the same opportunity. We envision a world where no harmful chemicals are produced, worn or discarded."

MISSION STATEMENT

"Our mission is to build a sustainable company that simultaneously looks after the People, the Planet and Profits."

Our values guide everything we do:

- Serve our customers with the highest quality service
- Deliver value in all products
- Provide a high quality of life for all employees
- Protect and restore our environment
- Maintain a reasonable profit

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In the past, some vendors of apparel made with organic cotton offered a limited style selection. Santa Ana, Calif.-based Article 1 has become a forerunner in the market by offering a wide array of trendier garment styles. For instance, this long-sleeve jersey crew (style 2210) is made of 100% combed ring-spun organic cotton and has an ultra soft hand.

able to respond to new environmental laws? What will be the costs of expediting a mandatory conversion versus a slow, phased voluntary conversion?

BE A LEADER

Whatever your efforts, remember that as a business, every small change can have an

enormous effect because you touch so many lives in your daily operations. In an attempt to lower our Styrofoam waste, we began offering free fair-trade coffee to all employees as long as they brought their own coffee cups. As a result, we have saved truckloads of Styrofoam from being dumped into landfills, and our employees

see our commitment and understand the value of sustainability themselves.

When looking for potential improvements, reach for the low-hanging fruit, processes that are easy to convert and will yield noticeable results. After you have some experience, you will begin noticing possibilities in every process of your operations. Focused awareness and effort will yield unrivaled results. ▲



Want to know more?

Visit www.IMPRESSIONSmag.com to read a Web exclusive, "Ten Good Reasons to Buy Organic."



Eric Henry is president of T.S. Designs Inc., Burlington, N.C., a printed apparel company that has pioneered sustainability in decorated apparel based upon the triple bottom line business model. You can find out more about sustainability and T.S. Designs by visiting www.tsdesigns.com or contact Eric via e-mail at eric@tsdesigns.com.

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