

# The Path to Green:

## Tips on Becoming an Eco-Friendly Business

By Tamara Matthews

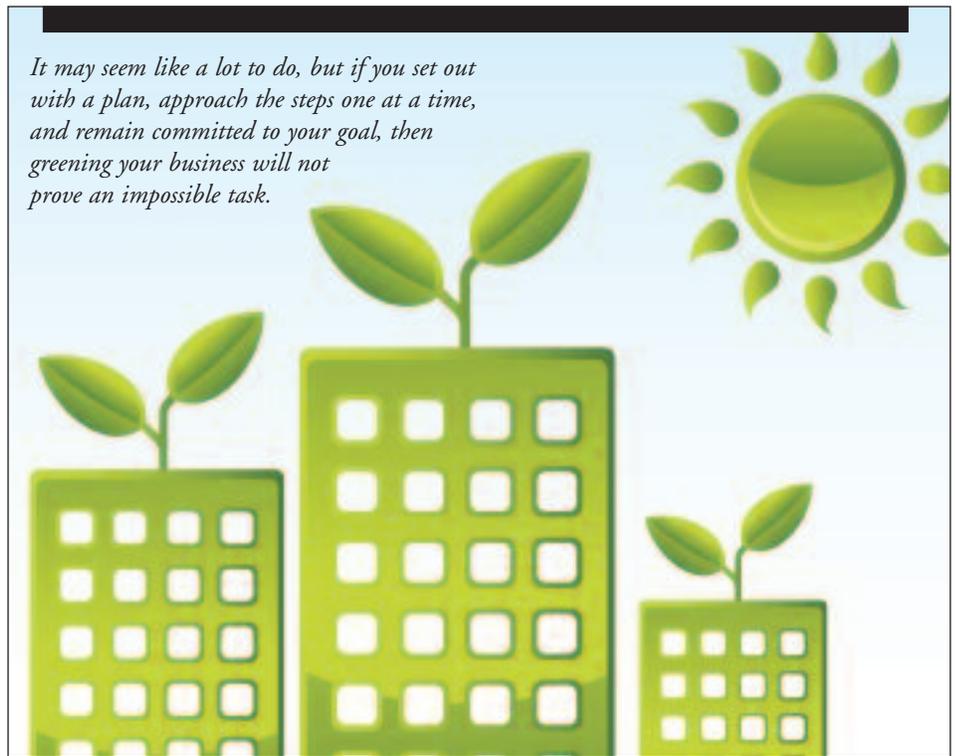
*What does green really mean? Read on to find out what green can mean for your business. You'll find tips on environmentally-friendly practices you can use in the office, in the field, in the shop, and maybe even a few you can take home with you too.*

If you thought fire protection's role in helping better the environment was fulfilled by complying with the Montreal Protocol, think again. Although phasing out chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and Halons has been an essential and well-met task for the industry, there is much more yet to be done.

These days, green business is good business. Customers are placing greater demand for environmental responsibility on the businesses they transact with, and the first rule of business is to give customers what they want. Doing so may not be as hard as you think.

Best of all, installing green practices might not only open a new market share for your company, it can lead to immense cost savings. What company doesn't want some budget relief? Sustainable practices can save money as well as energy resources.

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As the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) is steadily gaining strength with its programs, it makes not only economic but also legal sense to stay ahead of the trend. What is good environmental practice now could someday become environmental regulation, and trying to catch up after the fact could prove costly.

So the goal of this article is to provide tips to help fire equipment distributors down the path to green. How can your business do its part? Read on.

### Plan Before You Leap

The first step is to decide what your overall goals will be. Beverly Alkire, founder of Green Consultants, a San Francisco firm that offers sustainability management consulting services, suggests that you "do your research to understand the business benefits and potential return on investment for moving in a more sustainable business direction. Benefits include improving profitability by decreasing costs, capitalizing on competitive advantage, reducing risks,



attracting top talent, and many others. Get clear about your direction and objectives and then build a strategy and plan to get there. Be sure to track and measure your results." Having a clearer launching point can make your green goals more attainable.

Once you have a strategy, employee involvement at the initiation stage is crucial. If you take away disposable forks, paper napkins, bottled water, and individually wrapped snacks without giving a full picture of why this is being done, employees may believe that you are only being cheap and trying to save money, which may in turn promote resentment instead of support. But if you show how these things fit in with your larger mission and get employees involved in that mission, your strategy will be more successful. After all, that paper waste is not going to recycle itself.

To engage employees, the EPA recommends sending a kickoff memo announcing the initiative, conducting a brief training session, posting regular reminders, and offering incentives such as a reward program.<sup>1</sup> For instance, to encourage smart fuel economy practices with your vehicles, you could give a reward to the technician who has averaged the most miles per gallon at the end of the month.

You can aim high or aim low, either way it is important to do something to help the environment. The higher you aim, however, the greater chance your company can earn recognition, such as an ENERGY STAR award or certification as a green business from your local government, which you can in turn advertise to your customers.

### In the Office Waste Not, Want Not

A lot of waste goes into our landfills. According to the EPA, between 1960 and 2007 the amount of waste each person creates has almost doubled from 2.7 to 4.6 pounds per day.<sup>2</sup> And since we spend a good part of our lives at the workplace, you can be sure that a good share of that number is generated there.

That waste is costing your business money, whether you have to pay for a private hauler or have to constantly replenish your supply of disposable utensils and cups. The first step is to **reduce** the amount of waste you generate. For instance, you can reduce the amount of paper that gets used by printing on both sides of the sheet. You can reduce the amount of natural resources that get used up by purchasing recycled goods. Take a look around your office and find items that get used a lot. What are some ways you can reduce that usage?

You can also reduce your waste by **reusing** items. Alkire reinforces that it is

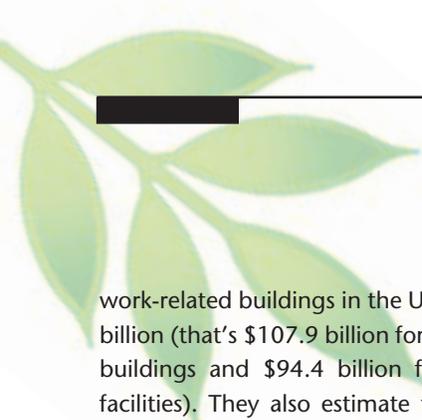
"best to reuse something before recycling it," because even in the recycling process energy is consumed. Reusing can prevent or at least delay something becoming a waste item. She suggests replacing disposable items with reusable items. Purchase washable cups and utensils, and take advantage of the public water supply by doing away with bottled water. Cardboard boxes are infinitely reusable: they can be reused for outgoing packages or offered up to employees who might need moving boxes.

The last eco-conscious option is to **recycle**, and many office items can be recycled. The EPA lists paper, newspapers, beverage containers, and batteries as just a few.<sup>3</sup> Paper is an easy and important recyclable. The average office worker generates approximately two pounds of paper and paperboard products every day, and 90 percent of all office waste is paper.<sup>4</sup> Printer cartridges can be sent back to the manufacturer for recycling. Unwanted electronics can either be donated (for which you can receive a tax credit), or the parts can be broken down and recycled. Electronics potentially contain volatile chemicals that can do harm if introduced to the waste stream, so it is especially important to dispose of them responsibly. The EPA has resources on companies that recycle electronics, and it is important to find a certified recycler that follows the EPA's Responsible Recycling (R2) practices. Go to [www.epa.gov/osw/](http://www.epa.gov/osw/) and check out the Electronics Recycling (eCycling) option.

### Electric Avenue

Anyone who has looked at an electric bill has seen what a money and energy drain electricity can be. The EPA estimates<sup>5</sup> that the combined annual energy cost for





work-related buildings in the U.S. is \$202.3 billion (that's \$107.9 billion for commercial buildings and \$94.4 billion for industrial facilities). They also estimate that 30 percent of the energy in these buildings is used inefficiently or unnecessarily. If efficiency were to improve by only 10 percent, \$20 billion could be saved.

Alkire says, "Reducing electricity costs directly reduces your bottom line operating expenses. Contact your energy provider to understand the energy conservation programs and resources they offer. For example, some energy providers will come to your business for free and conduct an energy audit, and they can provide services and a report to reduce your costs."

Lighting typically accounts for around 35 percent of business electricity usage, Alkire points out, so changing to more energy efficient solutions through replacing bulbs and fixtures can save you money. She says it helps to "leverage technology to take people out of the equation," such as installing lights that will automatically turn on and off. The following are a few more energy saving tips suggested by the EPA<sup>3</sup>:

- Turn off lights and equipment at the end of the day.
- Make sure the power management features are activated on your electronics so that they will go into sleep mode when inactive.
- When buying new equipment, look for ENERGY STAR products that run more efficiently.

### Feeling the Heat

You're paying for your heating and cooling, so don't let it go to waste! The climate control function of your office will be squandered in a poorly weatherized building. Alkire points out that, like utility companies, HVAC companies can do an audit and find ways for you to improve your air conditioning and heating functions. This can mean installing more efficient appliances and making sure potential air leaks are sealed tightly, among other assess-

ments. And just as with the electricity, you can save a lot by turning off heating or cooling functions at the end of the work day.

### In the Field

#### Get a Green Fleet

While completely replacing your vehicle fleet may not be an option right now, there are some things you can do to make your vehicles and your driving operations more green.

Some alterations in driver behavior can make a big difference. This may mean putting your technicians through a driver training program, but the effects will be well worth it. Encourage your drivers to avoid aggressive driving; those rapid starts and stops can cause engine wear and reduce gas mileage by up to 33 percent on the highway and 5 percent in the city.<sup>5</sup> Drivers can also make the most of their fuel by observing the speed limit and using cruise control when possible.

Well-maintained and uncluttered vehicles can also save on gas. A tune-up for a car that needs it can improve gas mileage by 4 percent. Properly inflated tires and the correct grade of motor oil can give you another 5 percent savings. Also make sure to replace dirty air filters. Before heading out, technicians should unload equipment and any empty or unwanted cylinders that they won't need on their trips. An extra 100 pounds can decrease fuel economy by 1 to 2 percent.<sup>6</sup>

It's a good idea to avoid idling. An idling vehicle uses up gas and that fuel is receiving 0 MPG. If the vehicle will be sitting for more than a few minutes, the engine should be shut off.

Effective routing is an important way to cut back on driving extra, unnecessary miles. Assign technicians to certain regions to avoid them driving across town and back to serve different customers. Invest in a GPS system to making tracking and routing easier to monitor. Try the UPS tactic of avoiding left-hand turns which drain time and gas while vehicles are waiting to turn.

You also might want to look into your different fuel options. Changing your source of fuel can reduce emissions, support domestic fuel sources, and in general cause less impact on the environment.<sup>7</sup> The EPA's SmartWay program at [www.epa.gov/smartway](http://www.epa.gov/smartway) has information on ethanol, biodiesel, and E85 among other fuels which might be worth looking into.

#### Paperless Reporting

Technology has afforded the industry the opportunity to go paperless in the field. Technicians can use electronic devices to fill in and submit inspection reports electronically. The office can receive this information automatically and the technician can save a trip which would mean more gas used.





## A Helping Green Hand

Be prepared to respond to customer's questions about your carbon footprint and green practices. Keep yourself informed about the GWP (global-warming potentials) of the agents you use, for example, and keep your technicians up to date on your business' green practices. You cannot insist that customers install a greener solution in their buildings if that is not what they want, and certainly fulfilling code requirements is your number one priority. But don't miss the opportunity to help customers when they are interested in installing green products in their building. Might they be able to use energy-saving lights in their emergency lighting or a clean agent with lower GWP? Position your company to serve as a helpful link in the green supply chain and you may just see a new customer base. Even if customers do not have an immediate intention to go green, if they are informed of your practices they may keep your company in mind further down the road.

## In the Shop

Many of the office strategies can apply to your shop too. Turning lights out, for one, and not leaving equipment running. But this work environment also presents unique conservation concerns.

## Maintain Heating and Cooling Efficiency

Get your technicians to leave the garage doors closed. Open doors create a huge exit for all the hard-earned warm or cool air (depending on the season). Along that note, make sure the walls of the shop are well insulated so they can do their job of keeping warm or cool air in too.

## Recycle Metals and Agents

Given the cost of materials, recycling in the shop is probably already a no-brainer. It's an absolute waste of money to *not* reuse recovered extinguishing agents. And, of course, law requires that Halon

agents be recovered and reused in an acceptable manner.

Unusable cylinders are made of recyclable metal that can be sent to scrap companies to be melted down and reused. Local recyclers that take metal can be found in the yellow pages or you can search online at earth911.com where you can easily look for recyclers who take the materials you wish to recycle. If a drop-off is required, you can work this into one of your driver's routes.

## Green Your Supply Chain

What difference does it make if you are trying to lower your environmental impact when your products come to you with a heavy carbon footprint? Work with your suppliers to find out what *their* green practices are. You might not be the only one inquiring and such consistent questions can do the job of nudging your suppliers in the right direction. Sharing your green business practices with all your partnering companies just might have a positive ripple effect.

## Now Take That Leap

These are just a few of the many ideas you can incorporate into your business practices. It may seem like a lot to do, but if you set out with a plan, approach the steps one at a time, and remain committed to your goal, then greening your business will not prove an impossible task.

In the end, Alkire says, greening your business is a win-win situation. Conscious conservation is a win for the environment, and a smart, restrained use of resources is a win for your company budget. Once you go green, you'll be glad you did. ♦

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## Valuable Resources

Use these online resources for help getting started.

ENERGY STAR for Small Business

[www.energystar.gov/smallbiz](http://www.energystar.gov/smallbiz)

The ENERGY STAR program offers free technical support and information for small businesses. On this website you can obtain the especially helpful guide: "Putting Energy Into Profits: ENERGY STAR Guide for Small Business."

EPA for Businesses and Non-Profits

[www.epa.gov/epahome/business.htm](http://www.epa.gov/epahome/business.htm)

This site has links to a wealth of information on topics ranging from environmental regulations to the SNAP program.

Green Consultants

[www.greenconsultants.com](http://www.greenconsultants.com)

A sustainability management consulting group based out of San Francisco, California.