SUSTAINABILITY: How Sustainable Are Your Company's Products?

Sustainability is a big environmental issue. For example, many consumers are now demanding sustainable products. Such products are beneficial because they:

Minimize environmental and social costs throughout their life cycle;
Maximize environmental and social benefits to communities; and
Remain economically viable.

As a result, companies have started including sustainability into their company goals. But how do you know how sustainable your company's products really are' We'll tell you how to use a [framework](#) from the [Lowell Center for Sustainable Production](#) at the University of Massachusetts to evaluate a product's sustainability.

5 Elements of Sustainable Products

Definitions of what constitutes a "sustainable product" vary. According to the Lowell Center, sustainable products have certain elements in common. Answer these [five questions](#) based on those elements to determine how sustainable your existing

products are or when developing new products:

Is the product environmentally sound'

In answering, consider factors such as the avoidance of toxic chemicals; energy, water and materials efficiency; durability; biodegradability; recyclability; and use of renewable resources.

Is the product healthy for consumers'

Consider whether the product design avoids toxic chemicals and whether the product is safe when used, such as not flammable or explosive.

Is the production process safe for workers'

Consider factors such as working hours and pace and whether the workplace is safe, ergonomically appropriate, well ventilated and free of toxic exposures.

Is the product beneficial to local communities'

Consider factors such as whether workers receive a living wage, community members have a voice in decision making and some of the profits accrue to the local community.

Is the product economically viable'

Consider whether the product is responsive to market requirements and is priced to internalize social and environmental costs.

The chart below spells out the criteria, based on the above questions, that a product should meet to be considered sustainable.

"[A New Way of Thinking: The Lowell Center Framework for Sustainable Products](),” Lowell Center for Sustainable

SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT FRAMEWORK — CRITERIA	
1) Is the product environmentally sound'	• Chemical and material inputs/outputs aren't hazardous. • Product is energy-, water- and materials-efficient in production and use. • Waste is prevented and/or minimized throughout the product lifecycle. • Product and packaging are durable as appropriate and are reused, repaired, recycled or composted. • Product is designed for disassembly—that is, it can be taken apart and remanufactured. • Renewable resources and energy are utilized in production and use. • Scarce resources are conserved and ecosystems aren't damaged in extracting resources for production. • Critical habitats are preserved during extraction, production and use.
2) Is the product healthy for consumers'	• It avoids chemicals that cause cancer or mutations; damage the reproductive, nervous, endocrine or immune systems; are acutely toxic; or accumulate or persist in the environment. • It's safe when used—that is, it isn't flammable, explosive or corrosive. • It's safe for children—that is, it doesn't cause lacerations, choking or strangling, burns/shocks, damage hearing or injure eyes and is developmentally appropriate.
3) Is the production process safe for workers'	• Workplace is safe—that is, it's clean, well lit, ventilated, with good air quality, well designed ergonomically, free of exposure to toxins, equipped for fire safety and other emergencies. • Workers receive adequate health and safety training. • Working hours and pace aren't excessive. • Workers have some job control and input into the production process. • If workers are housed in dormitories, the living quarters are clean and workers have sufficient food, access to potable water and sanitation. • Workers are treated fairly and with respect and dignity. • Child or forced labor isn't permitted. • Workers have freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

4) Is the product beneficial to local communities'	• Workers receive a living wage and can support their families without additional government assistance. • The work design is supportive to family life—that is, families aren't separated and good-quality child care is available for workers' children. • The work design promotes equity and fairness in the community—that is, there's no discrimination. • Some of the company's profits accrue to the local community to be used for public improvements, such as education or health care. • The work design promotes community input and participation and the community is informed about production and labor practices.
5) Is the product economically viable'	• The product is responsive to market requirements. • Innovation is encouraged to anticipate market needs. • The firm is stable in terms of ownership and philosophy. • The company reinvests in the facility to improve its capacity for further production. • Workers' skills are well utilized and their ideas and input are valued. • Communication is valued and encouraged among workers, management, community and consumers. • The product is priced for economic viability and also aims to internalize costs so that its production can be environmentally sound and socially just.