

# SUSTAINABILITY: Small- and Medium-Sized Companies Want Better Sustainability Programs



Getting any company to implement sustainability initiatives can be difficult for EHS professionals. And the challenges may be even greater in small- and medium-sized companies with more limited resources and narrower profit margins. But according to the 2014 Cox Conserves Sustainability Survey, a majority of small- and medium-sized businesses *want* better sustainability programs but are hindered by costs and a perception that investments in these initiatives don't matter to customers. Here's an overview of the survey's results.

## The Survey's Findings

The survey was conducted in Aug. 2014 among a sample of 2,012 decision-makers of US businesses with less than 1,000 employees. Based on the results, 52% of small- and medium sized businesses aren't satisfied with current levels of sustainability, but 65% are committed to increasing their eco-friendly activities. What's driving their investment in sustainability? Nearly two-thirds (60%) said cost reduction and company values.

Interestingly, money is both the biggest driver of and the biggest obstacle to increased sustainability. The primary goal driving the adoption of sustainability initiatives is reducing costs, said 60% of survey respondents, while 64% said the biggest obstacle to sustainable business practices is an unwillingness to pay additional costs. So it's no surprise that those businesses with the largest revenues (\$100 million or more) are far more likely to participate in sustainability activities than businesses earning less than \$10 million (85% and 57%, respectively).

In addition, more established companies—that is, those in business for 10 years or more—are more likely to have an established sustainability program (63%) than those launched in the last five years (52%).

There's also a strong connection between a business leader's knowledge of

sustainability and their level of participation. That is, the more they know, the more they participate. The top three areas where such leaders believe they need more guidance:

- Reducing energy consumption;
- Creating a sustainability policy; and
- Engaging employees and communities.

Gender is a factor, as well. The survey results show that small- and medium-sized businesses led by women currently embrace sustainability more than those led by men. Seventy percent of women are committed to increasing sustainable business activities and are more likely to offer recycling programs, material efficiency initiatives and telecommuting options, compared to 62% of men.

The top five sustainability initiatives implemented in the surveyed businesses are:

- Using supplies efficiently, such as printing on both sides of paper (61%);
- Using energy efficient lighting and equipment (57%);
- Offering recycling programs (56%);
- Offering paperless billing (53%); and
- Using virtual tools to conduct meetings (46%).

## **BOTTOM LINE**

Half of the business leaders surveyed believe that sustainability is good for the bottom line and will become a standard practice in the next five years. To make that prediction come true, EHS professionals should be leading the charge and educating senior management on the many benefits of investing in sustainability.

## **INSIDER SOURCE**

'2014 Cox Conserves Sustainability Survey,' Cox Conserves, Oct. 2014

## **Sustainability & Engagement Tips**

Reducing energy consumption and finding ways to engage employees and communities were identified in the 2014 Cox Conserves Sustainability Survey as areas in which business leaders need more education. So here are some tips on easy ways to increase efficiency:

1. Turn off computers and other office equipment when they aren't in use.
2. Lower your thermostat to the lowest comfortable setting when your business premises are occupied. Set the temperature even lower when it's unoccupied.
3. Use paper efficiently by printing double-sided and using shredded scrap paper as packing materials for shipping.
4. Talk to your building's or facility's manager about incorporating recycling programs as well as energy- and water-efficient appliances.
5. Offer paperless billing to reduce costs associated with materials and mailing.

And here are additional tips to improve employee and customer engagement:

1. Consider telecommuting as an option for employees.
2. Encourage employees to keep reusable mugs and bottles at work.
3. Ask your employees for ideas on how to operate more efficiently.
4. Offer discounts to customers who bring their own bags or opt out of taking one.
5. Add a note to your email signatures with the message: *Consider the environment. Please print this email only if necessary.*