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Sustainability 2009 – the year in review

Monday, 30 November 2009

While climate change and the debate over an emissions trading scheme sends the Federal Opposition into turmoil, let's take a look back at how sustainability in business and government has fared over the course of 2009. Dan Atkins reflects.

We experienced a number of crises in 2009, whether associated with the ever-increasing impacts of climate change, such as Victoria's bushfires last summer, or those of an economic nature such as the global financial meltdown. Such events present business with both increasing risks and opportunities. As a result the context within which business operates is changing.

The days of gaining prosperity through inefficient and often unwitting use of finite resources, the destruction of habitat or exploitation of cheap labour in faraway places, are numbered. New business thinking and practice is required to ride the wave of a new greener, more sustainable economy.

The rapid growth of both investment in clean technologies and the green collar job sector demonstrate that on the flip side of the global financial crisis, significant amounts of money are available for businesses willing to align with changing legislation and emerging green markets.

As the political and business world hangs on the outcome of next month's Copenhagen Conference, the latest science suggests that many climate aspects, such as temperature and sea level rise, are tracking close to or above the direst projections.

Here in Australia many aspects of the Federal Government's proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, in particular the \$14 billion worth of free credits for heavy polluters whose shareholders are predominantly based overseas, beg the question: where are the reductions in emissions actually going to come from? And for that matter, would we not be better off investing in better more innovative ways of doing things?

Risks, opportunities and innovation through sustainability

Driven by the need to innovate, the principles of sustainability are now being built into businesses' value chains. This year alone, we have witnessed the embedding of sustainability into the design and development of many major infrastructure projects throughout Australia.

Sustainable innovation also holds the key role in the current 'design phase' of the new green economy, by finding the necessary answers and driving the changes required to achieve long term business viability and prosperity.

Companies that recognise that sustainable innovation is required are shifting their entire business models, not just in an effort to adapt to the changing context but to reap the multitude of long lasting business benefits of doing so. This was highlighted by the actions of many globally leading companies participating in the recent World Economic Forum discussions on sustainable consumption in New York.

One example of this shift in business models is Nike. Having moved its focus on sustainability from 'corporate responsibility' to one of 'sustainable business and innovation', Nike has a goal of producing all its shoes from recycled materials – in other words, old shoes.

It is shifting its business model, from one based on the manufacture and selling of sporting apparel and footwear, to that of a large scale recycling company as well. The innovative life cycle thinking Nike has embedded into its future direction will allow it to access a rapidly growing green consumer market and cement its position as a leader in sustainability and innovative business practices.



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Innovative ideas in business can essentially come from any individual. To gain momentum however, support and collaboration are essential. It is vital that in 2010 we widen the lens from which we view our business and look for opportunities to collaborate and enable innovation to prosper.

The first step in doing so is to ensure that business functions across an organisation can work together and draw knowledge, skills and experience from each other. Sharing a common goal of sustainability is one way of achieving this. Companies also need to start thinking outside the box, identifying areas where they may capture new business opportunities by engaging in sustainable innovation.

In planning for 2010, businesses that would like to maximise their opportunities and emerge as winners in times of crisis should focus on the following:

- Developing executive understanding of the business case for sustainability;
- Integrating sustainability KPI's with key business drivers;
- Engaging everyone in the conversation and process of sustainability innovation - innovate together;
- Identify new business opportunities;
- Collaborate with and engage stakeholders - they are a major part of the journey; and
- Communicate your story.

Vantage Point columnist: Dan Atkins is MD of the Shaper Group, a set of companies that works with businesses, government and not-for-profits to improve their competitive advantage and reputation. Contact at DA@shapergroup.com

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Mine aquaculture project wins WA enviro award

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Sustainability 2009 – the year in review

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In brief: Businesses hope Copenhagen will deliver

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