

Today's business reality?

Kathryn Sheridan, founder and director of **Sustainability Consult**, looks at the business case for sustainability in the speciality chemicals industry



Used to write about sustainability and the moral imperative, about how businesses were the pioneers to lead us out of the gloom. And they are. Government alone will not be able to combat issues of climate change, energy use, resource efficiency, waste and water scarcity.

Business has the power to innovate and find solutions to society's problems. The moral imperative, coupled with sustainable solutions to lift us out of the economic crisis, made for a powerful argument. Sustainability Consult has always believed that sustainability makes business sense but now the case is clearer than ever, overtaking any need for a preaching position.

In the chemicals sector, many of the big players are setting an example, doing eco-audits, life-cycle analyses and more. Leaders are working with the community, saying that if they do not engage, they risk losing their licence to operate.

Even so, there are still parts of the industry prepared to defend more worrying substances literally to the death - hopefully just that of the substance and not the entire industry. This gives everyone a bad name. Even PR and communications consultants are sometimes criticised for working with the chemicals industry, though we believe we are helping create a better, more sustainable industry for the future.

Some in the industry acknowledge that the chemicals industry in Europe still operates behind closed doors, adding to the dinosaur image of an 'old industry', not fit for the times we are in. Any business today needs to be open and transparent and ready to fling open its doors to the community, whether through engaging with schools or other initiatives.

Science and technology education seems to be lacking in much of Europe and there is a skills shortage which will only worsen. Bringing the community into a plant or a lab through local action days could help shed light on what the chemical industry actually does and start to dispel any NIMBY concerns.

Unless you work directly on sustainability or on the regulatory side, the great soup of terminology might seem a little confusing. Even when you work in the field, it can sometimes be a challenge. What is more important however is to recognise the need to incorporate sustainability values into a business and to help workers become ambassadors for sustainability.

Whether it is carbon footprint, life-cycle analysis, cradle-to-cradle, closed loop production, renewable, sustainable, ethical or local which gets you going, there is no one-size-fits-all. Rather than playing buzzword bingo, each business has to find what works for it. Sustainability is no longer a 'nice to have', but something expected by stakeholders, customers and the broader public. Done credibly, sustainability values give a platform for communicating to the outside world. A look at the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan launched late last year shows how that can work.

Sustainability communications should be credible and fact-based. They should be part of an open and transparent approach and in tone they should be modest. Humble communications tend to dominate, as sustainability should not be used as a blatant marketing tool or to 'greenwash' a company's profile. There are

some good greenwash guides out there as well as guidelines on making green claims.

If that's the 'how', next comes the 'what'. What should we communicate on? First comes the strategy and if a company does not have a sustainability strategy then it should not start randomly communicating on sustainability.

We recommend communicating on commitments which, where possible, should be audited by a third party in order to be credible. Results and milestones are obvious communications hooks as they chart the progress to the goals set out. We also encourage communicating on failures, as these show both honesty but also the reality that being a more sustainable business is not always easy.

'Green' on its own is not enough. Customers also expect the performance and the cost to be right. The environmental profile is an added bonus but should not significantly increase the price of the material or product. This is where the biobased economy starts to look interesting.

If petrochemicals can be replaced by chemicals derived from renewable feedstocks, society's dependence on fossil fuels would be significantly reduced. If, for example, the printer and computer in your office, the interior of your car and the scanner at the hospital were made from bioplastics, our oil-guzzling habit would be lessened. Whilst many biobased chemicals and bioplastics today are made from food crops, the future lies in biomass, for example agricultural or forestry waste.

Chemicals industry veterans will point out that some petrochemicals have a better life-cycle analysis than biobased chemicals and in some cases, that is true. But renewable chemistry is a rapidly-evolving field and the renewability of a substance is a key selling point to the consumer goods producers. It really is time to ditch the old economy and embrace a new economy where the winners are those companies who take stock of their environmental profile and improve it.

By providing sustainable solutions, companies can position themselves as leaders and should be set to gain market share, provided they can compete on performance and cost as well as on the environmental profile of their products. Consumers want industry to do the work for them.

This is a unique opportunity for industry, not just for the big companies who are sorting their act out, or the small companies who are already providing environmentally-sound technologies and products, but for the whole industry. If education and communication are key to the positive perception of the chemicals industry, what better platform than sustainability to show how instrumental this industry is in everything we produce, consume and recycle?

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