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The Green Stuff

Despite talk of an economic recession I can't help but notice how busy everyone is. Businesses seem busy and town centres seem busy. If we are heading for a recession, there will be a strong need for business to adopt strategies that improve performance or make them more attractive than the competition. Recent surveys have shown that consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about environmental and social issues and are looking to businesses to show what they are doing to improve their performance.

Green marketing

Green marketing can be a powerful tool to attract customers. The Body Shop and more recently Marks and Spencer are a testament to this. However, if handled incorrectly and claims are made without substance, it can seriously damage a company or brand's reputation. As recently as 30th January, the British Gas advert claiming carbon-free gas and electricity supplies was judged to be misleading by the Advertising Standards Authority. Other notable examples include Easyjet, judged to have made a misleading claim relating to lower CO₂ emissions from their fleet (April 2007) and Shell, who received negative press relating to claims made last November about using waste CO₂ to grow flowers and the use of waste sulphur in concrete manufacture.

Labels

Of course, this doesn't mean that corporate bodies are deliberately aiming to mislead the public. Behind the glossy adverts there are, usually, real commitments to addressing environmental issues of the products or services provided. The key is being able to back these claims up with proof. There are several ways to prove to your customers that you are sensitive to environmental issues. Care needs to be taken about what these symbols and labels mean. Depending on your market place there may be certain expectations about the qualifications you need to demonstrate in order to be on a supplier list for example. The following outlines some of the key ones.

ISO14001

The international standard for environmental management systems (EMS) requires registered organisations to adopt a formally structured business system to meet the requirements of the Standard, with independent verification provided by one of a number of certification bodies. Implementing an EMS to achieve this gives external recognition of an organisation's commitment to, and improvements in, environmental performance. However, real, embedded and ongoing improvements to environmental performance are not guaranteed as the external audit can become the driver for improvement programmes, and the green credentials are not necessarily open to public



scrutiny, as disclosure of environmental performance and wider communication with stakeholders is at the discretion of the registered company.

ACORN

The Acorn Scheme and British Standard BS8555 present an alternative approach for implementing an EMS, with the process broken down into six phases. Each of these phases is, theoretically, able to be independently audited (although in practice, organisations tend to wait until phase 3 before calling in the auditors). BS8555 has more of a focus on performance evaluation than ISO14001 and is seen as a slightly less formal approach to adopting an EMS, with particular relevance to smaller companies as it “hand-holds” the organisation through each stage of EMS implementation. However, there is a degree of cynicism in industry regarding its value in relation to ISO14001 (the final stage of BS8555 is accreditation to ISO14001 or EMAS).

EMAS

The Eco-Management and Audit Scheme is a voluntary code produced by the European Union. It essentially adopts the ISO14001 model for an EMS but includes additional requirements, such as a mandatory Initial Environmental Review prior to establishing the system, and a publicly available, independently assessed report on annual environmental performance. It is this reporting that is EMAS's strength, lending confidence to claims of reduced environmental impact. However, it is also the main reason for low take-up of the scheme by businesses, as the “warts and all” approach required in the reporting does not sit well with some organisations.

Ecolabels

Ecolabels are generally given to specific products. Calculations and analysis are made about the way a product is made, the materials used, the total amount of energy consumed etc. There is a wide range of ecolabels, for example covering products as diverse as soil conditioners and composts, washing machines and IT equipment, paper and forestry products. The standard applied depends on the product. Used on a product's packaging, ecolabels give an instant visual indication of environmental credentials to customers. On the downside, the actual standards it has met are not so easy to find.

Green achiever

Unlike the other schemes the Green Achiever provides both positive assistance in addressing environmental issues as well as a vehicle for marketing your endeavours. It allows the absolute beginner to start to improve its green credentials and for each and every business to decide what it wants to implement according to its business. Any commitment an organisation makes is clearly shown on the Green Achiever website.

How does a company benefit? Each company can determine for itself how far it wants to go and what actions it wants to take. Such actions are likely to lead to cost savings through the reduction of energy consumption for example. Consumers, suppliers and



stakeholders can see exactly what a Green Achiever is doing and make a decision for themselves as to whether it is "Green" enough.

This is a new scheme which is catching the imagination of companies big and small and why wouldn't it? It's simple, with everyone enjoying the benefits. Find out more at www.greenachiever.co.uk.

What's the difference?

It's clear that environmental issues are not going away, and that consumers are becoming increasingly aware and informed. Deciding on the approach you take to address the environmental impacts of your business, and how best to promote this beyond your organisation can be a daunting task. Schemes such as Green Achiever exist to help businesses make a start on this, then progressively build on it with real improvements to your environmental performance, coupled with effective and responsible communication to your stakeholders.