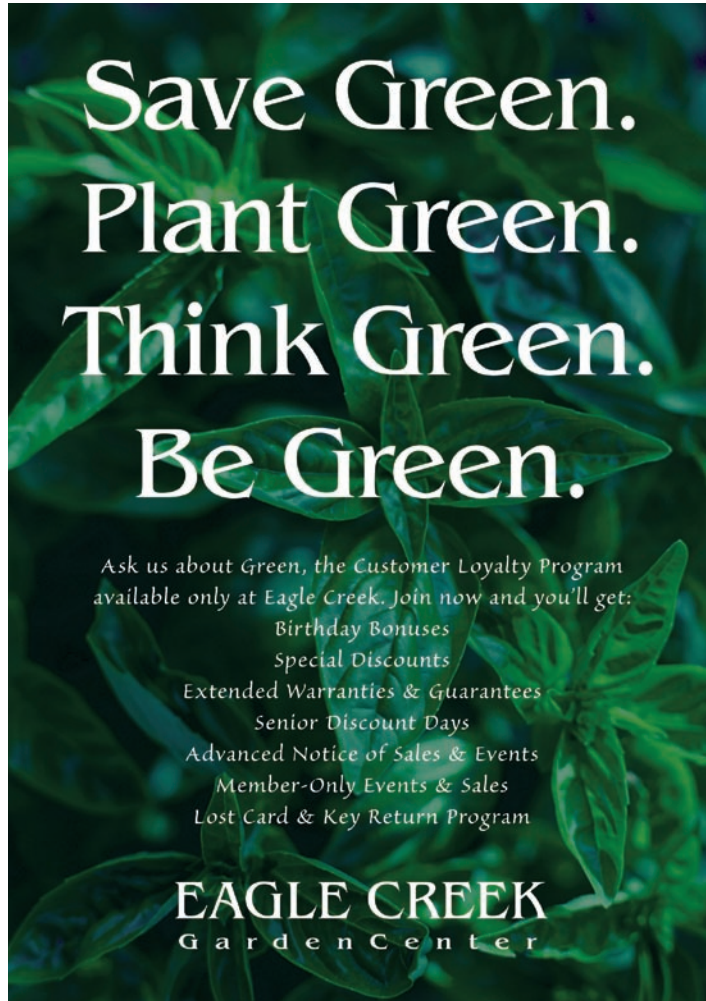




**Visual support**

Eagle Creek Garden Center promotes its commitment to green practices with posters highlighting its customer loyalty program (right). It also designed a logo for its sustainably grown branded plants (above).



# Tell Your Sustainable Story

WRITTEN BY  
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**Craft a clear vision for a more eco-friendly business, then promote it.**

OVERWHELMED BY the demands of sustainability? You are hardly alone. Don't despair. The following is a three-step process to help you craft a vision for a more sustainable business, prioritize changes and put it all into practice.

Sustainability is basic common sense and good business. Efficient use of resources like energy and water cuts costs and makes your garden center leaner and more competitive. Many garden centers are already efficiently heating their greenhouses and watering plant

stock. Others are recycling plastic pots and offering organic fertilizers and pest control products.

Carrying a few eco-friendly products is no longer enough to differentiate your garden center from the boxes. This spring, Wal-Mart promoted eight green products, including biodegradable pots and outdoor furniture made with Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood.

What's driving the overall effort?

Consider stepping back to strategically think in a big-picture way about

your garden center's sustainability mission, and what you are telling your customers about it.

Such an endeavor is well worth the time and effort, says Anna Clark, President of EarthPeople, a sustainability consulting firm in Dallas. Here's why: there are 41 million people, representing one in four Americans and a \$209 billion market for products and services focused on lifestyles of health and sustainability. "To be blind to this is to be blind to opportunity," Clark says. The market

Authenticity is key. Make sure your green mission statement sounds unique - and honest. Don't make any claims you can't responsibly support.

is growing, and represents the future of business - and it is a natural fit for independent garden centers.

**Define it.** To efficiently tie together your eco-initiatives and the rationale behind them, create a green mission statement. It can be a pledge to identify and address the details, as well as a statement of the kind of unique, environmentally responsible and profitable business your garden center strives to be. What exactly are you and your staff working toward, and why is it important?

An articulated mission statement that can be shared with employees and customers will help drive your garden center toward profitability and environmentally friendly goals, says Robin Smith-Martin, who advises companies on sustainability as Principal Advisor at Progressive Strategy Group in Asheville, NC.

"In order to manage expectations of the company and effectively manage relationships [with employees, customers and suppliers], you're going to want to have a stated green vision statement," Smith-Martin says.

A well-crafted green mission statement reflects your community and presents an opportunity to differentiate your garden center from the national big box chains.

"The mission statement represents your values, how you want to be perceived in the world, how you want to relate in your community, and how you want people to see you as a contributor to the community," says Lowell Downey, a green business consultant and Owner of Artful Relations in Napa, CA.



The process of writing a statement begins with company leaders and often involves meeting with employees. There is no quick-fix or easy solution; sustainability is a long-term process. "You start in your office and think about what you can do, and say, 'Let's talk about our impact,'" Downey says.

The statement itself can be just a few sentences that affirm your intentions to respect the environment in the production, distribution and delivery of your products and services. It will serve as your garden center's pledge to strive for going above and beyond what is required to conserve natural resources.

Authenticity is key, says Smith-Martin. Make sure your mission statement

**'The Blogging Nurseryman'**  
Trey Pitsenberger of The Golden Gecko gets the word out about his garden center's sustainable practices via his blog at the company's website.

sounds unique - and honest: "Don't make any claims you can't responsibly support." Garden centers should take it slowly, and set achievable goals and realistic milestones. Even a small reduction in water consumption is a great start. Next year, set a goal of cutting water use even more, and soon the reductions will add up.

Ask your employees and customers for direction on how to be both unique and sustainable, advises Clark. "If you

## How Others Do It

### Starbucks

At more than a few sentences, Starbucks' environmental mission statement outlines the coffee company's vision of corporate citizenship:

*Starbucks is committed to a role of environmental leadership in all facets of our business. We fulfill this mission by a commitment to:*

*Understanding of environmental issues and sharing information with our partners.*

*Developing innovative and flexible solutions to bring about change.*

*Striving to buy, sell and use environmentally friendly products.*

*Recognizing that fiscal responsibility is essential to our environmental future.*

*Instilling environmental responsibility as a corporate value.*

*Measuring and monitoring our progress for each project.*

*Encouraging all partners to share in our mission.*

### Whole Foods Market

Whole Foods explains its philosophy in a 20-paragraph "Declaration of Interdependence," originally created in 1985 by 60 employees and then updated in 1988, 1992 and 1997.

The declaration includes the company's motto - Whole Foods, Whole People, Whole Planet - and outlines its vision to:

*Sell the highest quality natural and organic products available; Satisfy and delight our customers; Support team member excellence and happiness; Create wealth through profits and growth; Support our communities and encourage local involvement; and Promote environmental stewardship.*

want people to be receptive to your green strategy, start with the people that matter most - your people," she says. "They're the face of your company." She adds, "People support that which they help to create."

The same goes for your customers. "Let your customers co-create with you so they're getting what they want," Clark says. She suggests inviting shoppers to fill out a short survey about what type of eco-friendly gardening information they need the most. The survey could also help build an e-mail list. And in the process, you've just informed your customers of your garden center's commitment to sustainability, positioning your business as a helpful, informative resource.

**Prioritize it.** Energy, water and waste stream should top your list of areas to review. First, study them to figure out how much is wasted and at what cost. This information will guide what to address first. "Start with what you know and what you can control. You'll save money," says Clark.

Consider visiting Energy Star's website, which includes a small-business guide to saving energy and a state-by-state listing of utility energy-efficiency programs offered to small businesses. A professional energy audit could also pinpoint areas of greatest waste.

Consider alternative sources of energy. For Eagle Creek Garden Center in Bainbridge, OH, and its sister wholesale division, sustainability has been part of the company's culture from the outset, says Jill Cain, Co-Owner of both businesses.

When the company built its wholesale greenhouse in 1999, it invested in energy-efficient equipment like an open-roof design, energy curtains and radiant heat in the greenhouse. Two years ago, it turned to a biomass burner to

help with rising fuel costs. At first, it burned wood chips and sawdust; now it burns cow manure, which is freely available from a dairy herd that shares the property. The garden center is also looking for alternatives to the natural gas it uses to heat its retail store.

Both of Eagle Creek's locations use a recirculating water system to capture runoff from plants during watering and from gutters, flowing it into holding tanks - two 30,000-gallon tanks at the growing facility and two 5,000-gallon tanks at the retail store. The water is separated by fertilizer content. The tanks are tapped first, before putting any stress on the properties' wells or the water table, she says.

Next, take a look at everything you're throwing away, says Clark. What can be reused or recycled? Keep in mind that new recycling businesses are constantly popping up, and what used to be trash may be able to be recycled.

Trey Pitsenberger is Co-Owner with his wife, Monica, of The Golden Gecko Garden Center in Garden Valley, CA, located about 40 minutes outside Sacramento in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. He invites his customers to return their plastic pots. His community recycles a variety of plastics. One vendor gives him a 10-cent credit for every plastic tray he returns.

It can be tough to reuse returned pots because an array of mismatched pots interfere with a clean, uniform look. But customers may be more forgiving than you think. "Once they appreciate a business and believe in what you're doing, they will overlook a lot of those little imperfections that in the past we wouldn't have thought they would," says Pitsenberger.

Now, look at your supply chain, advises Clark. Are you purchasing the most

environmentally responsible products you can afford for your operation and to sell to customers?

Pitsenberger makes it a point to purchase high-quality plants from small, independent companies, as local as possible. For him, doing so is part of ensuring the sustainability of local independent nurseries. He avoids purchasing from companies that sell to the box stores.

Nearly all of The Golden Gecko's planting mix, potting soil, fertilizer and pest control offerings are organic. "A plant grown in soil alive with microorganisms is going to grow and look better than a plant that's grown in synthetic soil and syn-

thetic fertilizers," says Pitsenberger.

He fully expects the box stores to carry organic controls and fertilizers, and says it's a smart move for independents to offer plants grown in organic soil with as organic of a story as possible. The Golden Gecko's customers are becoming much more interested in the story behind the plants.

Clark says, "What you want at the end of the day is to enhance your cus-



**Getting the word out**

Teaching organic gardening practices during seminars is a great way to communicate your green focus in person.

tomers' value proposition by saying they are getting a more natural plant, a healthier plant."

**Promote it.** Knowing your customers and market teaches you how to craft and communicate your green mission statement, all part of "screaming your green," Clark says. Tell them what steps you are taking to operate as an environmentally responsible garden center, and provide a quick word about your ultimate vision. Add the statement to your employee room, website and register receipt, and post it in your store. Every associate should be well-versed in it.

Pitsenberger uses newsletters, the store's website and his blog to talk about his sustainability efforts. In-store signage highlights organic products, and the garden center teaches organic gardening techniques during approximately 22 workshops each year. Each workshop typically draws an average of 25 people.

A key in promoting your statement is sincerity. "We have to be so incredibly honest with the customer," says Pitsenberger. "We'll bond, and they'll be customers for life." ■



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