Sustainable Food Trade Association

Implementing Sustainability
A Case Study

MOM's Organic Market
The Sustainable Food Trade Association is a non-profit trade association that represents North American organic food companies. Our membership is comprised of a diverse mix of organic producers, processors, manufacturers, distributors and retailers. We support our members in implementing innovative sustainable business practices across the supply chain, from farm to retail.

**Mission**
Build the capacity of the organic food trade to transition to sustainable business models.

**Vision**
Our vision is to conduct our businesses in a way that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. We recognize that ecology; human communities and economy are interwoven into a seamless net of causes and effects. Therefore we embrace the challenge to move our operations and actions toward sustainable models where the management of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of development, and the evolution of the organic food trade becomes consistent with the principles of sustainability.

We agree to strive for continuous improvement and to practice transparency in annually auditing our organizations in the following areas:

- Organic
- Distribution
- Energy
- Climate Change
- Water
- Waste
- Packaging
- Labor
- Animal Care
- Education
- Governance

As growers, processors, handlers, brokers, certifiers and retailers in the organic food trade, members of SFTA are deeply concerned about the unprecedented scale and speed of environmental pollution and degradation, climate change, and depletion of natural and human resources that our business practices may cause. We believe urgent actions are needed to address these fundamental problems and reverse these trends. It is for this reason that SFTA presents case studies of our members to share their practices to the wider industry.
MOM’s Organic Market Bans the sale of Bottled Water

MOM’s Organic Market at a Glance

Scott Nash founded MOM’s Organic Market (MOM’s) in 1987 at the age of 22. MOM's started as a home-delivery/mail order company out of Scott’s mother’s garage in Beltsville, Maryland. Two years later, the company moved its location to a 2,000 square foot space in Rockville, MD with the intention of opening a retail store. Over time, as the retail business increased, the delivery/mail order was phased out. MOM’ became a full-time retail grocer with the goal then, as it is today, of providing high quality organic produce, discount prices, and exceptional customer service.

MOM’s has slowly expanded from its roots to 10 stores total, 7 in Maryland and 3 in Virginia. As MOM’s grows, they remain committed to their purpose, mission, and reason for existing: “To Protect and Restore the Environment.”

In March 2012, MOM’s became a member of the Sustainable Food Trade Association (SFTA). At this time MOM’s signed the “Declaration of Sustainability” a pledge committing to continuous improvement and transparency as well as annually reporting on the company’s environmental and social impacts.

Why MOM’s was well positioned to challenge an expected norm.

MOM’s employees and customers are very passionate about protecting and restoring the environment. The company is not only strictly committed to the sale of organic products, but has led numerous campaigns to engage employees and customers to think about their personal impact on the environment. MOM’s offers a program called “Terra Pass your Gas” that offsets the green house gas emissions for all their customers’ shopping trips to and from MOM’s. They offer recycling drop-off services to customers in every store and annual recycling drives for unique items such as holiday lights, jeans and electronic waste. Taking a stand on a controversial topic like plastic water bottles demonstrates the company’s values in action, thus attracting and retaining the right kind of committed employees to work at MOM’s.
For some time MOM’s had known that the sale of plastic water bottles was an unsustainable business model. Producing plastic bottles, shipping and distributing heavy containers of water, creating litter and needing landfill space for a product is not sustainable. Plastic bottled water can be replaced with a safe alternative (tap water) that is relatively inexpensive and easily accessible just about everywhere.

Only two out of every ten plastic bottles end up in the recycling bin. The other 80% lingers in landfills, or worse, in the ocean. Plastic is normally derived from fossil fuels, which are non-renewable resources, and therefore is not a long-term strategy for sustainability. However, there has been a growing demand for filtered water, which is more often than not sold in plastic bottles.

**A CFO takes a risk for the business**

Even though bottled water had sold well at MOM’s for years, the staff never felt very good about selling it. This unease was reinforced by exposure to an online video called "The Story of Bottled Water," which confirmed the belief that plastic bottled water is bad for the environment. Around this time MOM’s CFO, Kelly Moler, suggested that the company stop selling bottled water. Kelly had confidence that the company could do it by successfully educating their customers about the impact of plastic bottled water.

Despite their strong mission at MOM’s, the decision was not an easy one. There was a lot of fear that not selling plastic bottles would be a detriment to the business. At the same time there was also a feeling that the company had an opportunity to leverage their strong values to begin challenging traditional ways of thinking and create sustainable alternatives. It was this belief and recognition of responsibility that set the leadership of MOM’s down the path of eliminating plastic bottles. “We were simply apprehensive to take the leap. Frankly, we finally decided to focus on doing the right thing for the world, rather than doing the right thing for business. Turns out, we got to have our cake and eat it too- because it was also good for business.” says Founder and CEO Scott Nash.
The details of launching the project

Once senior management at MOM’s approved the project, implementation would take a coordinated effort across many departments to achieve roll out and success. The first step was to identify a perfect campaign name – “Plastic Surgery”, with the goal to ban bottled water from store shelves in an effort to reduce unnecessary plastic waste and to take a stand against the plastic pollution in landfills and oceans.

There was also the need to balance the customer demand for filtered water. Research was done on the best method to provide water in a way that did not rely on the use of individual plastic bottles. MOM’s settled on using a reverse osmosis water machine made by Primo. This technology is a water filtration system based on using municipal tap water that then removes all contaminants from the water. This water contains no trace minerals or nutrients of any kind. But should the customer want, MOM’s also sells mineral additives for water.

MOM’s also realized that some customers may prefer to filter at home rather than lug water jugs to and from the grocery store. MOM’s sells a home countertop and a smaller sink-mounted filter filtration system by Santevia that produce alkaline water, which contains many beneficial minerals.

Primo Water filtration system used for bulk water sales.
Education is a top priority

The most important step was to get buy-in from customers. However, success would not be achieved unless all stakeholders, employees and consumers understood the desire to eliminate plastic waste. The first step in the plan began with MOM’s staff. Time was allocated to train all staff on the reasons for the decision and how to communicate the purpose to customers. The staff viewed the movie "Addicted to Plastic" to further educate them on the perils of a world dominated by plastic. After the movie screening all employees received a glass re-usable water bottle to help them transition to reusing non-plastic bottles.

The second step in the plan was to educate customers. Signs were hung throughout the store to educate consumers as to how and why bottled water is unnecessary and bad for the environment. Shelves were left empty for a couple of months with a large sign stating: "These shelves used to be filled with bottled water." The company was able to show the video - "The Story of Bottled Water" on a constant loop in all stores on computers. They also made “Addicted to Plastic” available for all customers to borrow at the Customer Service desk.

To further facilitate the transition, MOM’s offered their customers one free gallon of purified reverse-osmosis water from their in-house water dispensers, (39 cents/gallon after first gallon). They also provided free 16 oz compostable cups filled with their purified water for customers to sip as they shopped. (The Plastic Surgery campaign also included eliminating plastic produce bags, deli cup containers, utensils, etc. in the store.)
**What were the results?**

By banning the sale of individual bottled water, MOM's has prevented 674,038 plastic bottles from being consumed, therefore saving plastic from polluting the landfill/ocean by switching to “bulk” water from the reverse-osmosis water filter machines.

There was some pushback from the [International Bottled Water Association](https://www.bottledwater.org) who questioned the initiative, concerned that MOM’s was taking away product opportunities in their stores.

“The Ban The Bottle initiative has been a success. Through various articles and the education campaign customers and employees widely support the change. Bottled water was once a big part of the health movement and the natural foods industry. People are now thinking twice about the issue,” says founder and CEO Scott Nash.

Change is not easy, not just for a company but for customers who have expectations when they shop at a store. The “Plastic Surgery” roll-out process was relatively straightforward and successful on many levels. However, there were customers who were frustrated with the decision to ban bottled water and those customers did not return. MOM’s leadership anticipated some negative response and concluded that these customers were not their core customers and they could accept the potential loss. Ultimately, the company remains committed to their core values to utilize their business to “Protect and Restore the Environment.” The “Plastic Surgery” initiative reinforced that *walking the talk* by banning bottled water was good for their brand, their customers and their employees.

**Motivation for Change**

The Leadership team and staff and MOM’s Organic Market now have a proven campaign under their belt. The “Plastic Surgery” initiative not only directly addressed an area of concern for the company, but also demonstrated that making a good decision for the environment would benefit their business and not hinder it. In fact, the company is currently the only retail chain in the country to ban bottle water and they feel that their customers truly appreciate the leadership and commitment to core values. This has inspired the MOM’s team to continually strive to find new, unconventional ways to eliminate waste and to protect and restore the environment.
Implementing Sustainability is a series of case studies intended to provide practical examples of how SFTA Members execute on the SFTA declaration areas. By highlighting the work of companies with strong systems in place, we hope to encourage wider adoption of sustainability practices and encourage transitioning companies towards sustainable business models.

For more information, visit:
http://sustainablefoodtrade.org/case-studies