Walking the Talk
—from Sustainable Food Trade Association, www.sustainablefoodtrade.org

New research by MIT Sloan Management Review and The Boston Consulting Group looked at companies that “walk the talk” in addressing significant sustainability concerns. In their report, Sustainability’s Next Frontier, they describe a disconnect between thought and action in companies related to addressing sustainability concerns. According to the survey nearly two-thirds of respondents rate social and environmental issues, such as pollution or employee health, as “significant” or “very significant” among their sustainability concerns. Yet only about 40% report that their organizations are largely addressing them. Even worse, only 10% say their companies fully tackle these issues. These 10% have been termed “Walkers” and share similar characteristics: they focus heavily on five fronts - sustainability strategy, business case, measurement, business model innovation and leadership commitment. For them, addressing significant sustainability issues has become a core strategic imperative and a way to mitigate threats and identify new opportunities.

This research was done with large corporations in many different sectors from healthcare to commodities. It would be interesting to see how the results would compare if small to mid-size businesses were surveyed. And even more interesting if the organic sector surveyed itself. However even without such a survey there are known “Walkers” within the organic sector - the members of the Sustainable Food Trade Association (SFTA). As a network of sustainability champions SFTA members have put into action what The Sustainability’s Next Frontier report concludes - “Working collectively, organizations can be more systematic and sophisticated in tackling significant sustainability issues across the value chain — from supply to finished product.”

So enough talk, here are four examples of what has been accomplished by companies that connect solutions to sustainability concerns with business values.

In its recent public Sustainability Report, Annie’s announced they have purchased 91 million pounds of organic ingredients over the last three years (increasing 18%, or by 35 million pounds, from FY 2012-FY 2013), 90% of their packaging is recyclable, and organics now represents 88% of their annual sales. The company is also undertaking extensive internal initiatives to reduce waste.

Thanks to a new solar thermal system that GloryBee installed, the company should save the equivalent of 2,000 tons of CO2 over the life of the system, the equivalent of 358,000 gallons of gas or almost 82,000 trees! In addition, on January 8, GloryBee was awarded the “Bold Steps Award,” which recognizes Eugene, OR-based sustainable businesses. Sustainability practices that helped the company earn the recognition included the fact that in 2012 the company reduced its use of propane, natural gas, and water by 15%, 4%, and 37% respectively. In 2013, it diverted 76% of its waste from the landfill, an increase of 11% from 2012. GloryBee also offsets 100% of its electricity consumption with Renewable Energy Certificates, and diverted 65% of all waste from landfills that year.

Organic Valley ended its 25th year with $928 million in sales and $2.6 million in donations as well as $6 new jobs and key gains in renewable energy initiatives. The cooperative’s farmer-owners installed seven on-farm renewable energy projects producing approximately 200,000 kWh of clean energy annually, in WI, IA, VT, MI and OH. Farmers received federal and state grants totaling over $112,000 to help fund the projects. In terms of renewable energy production, Organic Valley installations produced over 80 percent more clean, renewable energy in 2013 than the previous year. Additionally, Organic Valley installed a 5,000-gallon biodiesel fueling station near its headquarters in La Farge, WI for use in its local vehicle fleet.

One of the features in the SunOpta Sustainability Progress Report released in July 2013 is the Tree Planting Partnership. Since April 2009, SunOpta has partnered with C.H. Robinson and Trees Ontario to reduce the environmental impact resulting from the transport of their products. This partnership program plants one tree for every SunOpta/C.H. Robinson shipment. Since 2010, 11,440 trees have been planted which is equivalent to unplugging 2,578 homes from the electric grid; removing 3,588 passenger cars off the road; and a CO2 offset of 17,222 metric tons over the life of the trees.

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