



The Business Shade of Green

Four ways environmentally friendly practices can boost your bottom line

BY ELIZABETH LOUISE HATT

Even in the midst of a recession, many people are making an effort—and paying higher costs—to maintain an eco-friendly lifestyle. For a business owner, this trend can work to your advantage, both from a marketing standpoint and by saving you money. You can make your store eco-friendly in a number of ways—from community involvement to customer service to changing your store’s utility providers. Here are four ways to begin:

1. DITCH PLASTIC

Decrease the use of plastic bags, which typically are not biodegradable (although some claim to be) and are detrimental to the environment and animals, by offering reusable eco-friendly bags. Available in a variety of sizes, they are ideal not only for shopping, but also to use as a bag for work or school.

Cloth bags are not only environmentally friendly, they work as a tool to market your business. While most businesses sell them for a small fee, Pat Cafarella, owner of Dancer’s Boutique in Fitchburg, MA, went one step further and gave them away. In a

six-week period, she handed customers 500 bags emblazoned with her store name and website.

Cafarella says she considered charging for the bags, but since she received financial help from a manufacturer—whose name is also on the bag—she wrote it off as an advertising expense. And it’s worked. She says, “I see people carrying them in the grocery store because they are huge and not flimsy.” Customers are grateful to receive the bags. “Every day we get responses from people who are glad that we did this,” she adds.

If the extra cost is a concern for your business, there are other options. Owner of Silhouette Theatre and Dance Shop in Courtenay, BC, Cathy Rees, replaced her trademark bright pink plastic bags with brown paper bags. Her only complaint was that they were boring. So to spice them up, she and her staff decorate the bags with felt pens, incorporating holiday designs at Halloween and Christmas.

Many retail outlets instantly put merchandise in a

bag, but taking the time to ask the customer’s preference will pay off. Maria Parsons, owner of Expressly Motion Dancewear in Torrance and Redondo Beach, CA, uses this technique by placing a rubber band around the purchases and asking, “Would you like to go green?” She says usually the customer is fine with that, but if not, she stocks both “pretty” bags with a logo on them and used bags that she—and customers—bring from home.



Leeds Classic Cotton Meeting Tote (7900-04): \$1.83 each, 288 minimum. www.promomanagers.com

From top: iStockphoto.com; Collin Fowler

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2. START A DANCEWEAR DRIVE

The first thing people think when they hear the term “green” is recycling—with paper and cardboard boxes coming immediately to mind. But what about dancewear? Donating gently used dance apparel and shoes to nonprofit arts and community organizations is not only a great way of recycling, but it also publicizes your business as a charitable one.

Jo Steadman, owner of Freestyle Dancewear in Hughsville, PA, started a donation program in time for the holidays that she intends to continue throughout the year. Inspired by the basket of outgrown shoes available to the students of the studio where she teaches, she thought, “Why can’t I be more helpful to the community as a whole?”

Since she’d only been in business since July, this did wonders to promote her store as well as create a positive, eco-friendly image. To generate interest, Steadman talked to customers, placed flyers around the store and mailed a letter and flyer to all the studios within a 60-mile radius. She also sent e-mails to local studio owners and advertised on the radio.

Customers and dancers brought in their outgrown shoes, dancewear and costume pieces, and the rep of a major manufacturer made a large donation of brand-new items. Steadman then reached out to community and after-school programs, such as the YMCA and Community Alliance for Progressive Positive Action (CAPPA). She delivered her box of goods to the programs and did her best to fit everyone with what they needed. “If kids really need something, and it’s not in the box—well, I have donated a brand new pair of jazz shoes from my store,” she says.

While Steadman’s intentions were altruistic, she predicts her business will benefit. “I reached out to bigger organizations—they know I’m here, so now they come to me to get what they need,” she says, noting the benefit and recognition outweigh promotion expense. “It was well worth the cost,” says Steadman. “It’s always hard to get new business and get yourself out there—this was equally as hard.”

3. LIGHTEN YOUR LIGHTING

Though switching to energy-efficient lighting has up-front costs, in the long run it will save you money. The easiest way to determine your current usage and where you can save is to have an electrician or an agent from the local power company evaluate your premises.

Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs (CFLs) use about 75 percent less energy than incandescent bulbs. “This is the easiest and fastest change you can make in your store,” says Dan Zaweski, assistant VP of energy-efficient programs for Long Island Power Authority (LIPA). CFLs advertise 5,000-plus hours of life, while an incandescent is about 10 percent of that time.

If you have fluorescent lighting, you can upgrade to more modern, efficient bulbs to obtain about a 25 percent reduction in your lighting costs. (This is the cheapest option—there are different levels of energy-efficient bulbs available.) Zaweski says that many power companies, including LIPA, structure rebates to businesses that retire their older lighting and replace it with a more efficient system. Energy-efficient fluorescents have not shown a drastic increase in lifetime but



the price reduction makes them beneficial.

Rees converted all her lighting to fluorescent and LED bulbs, significantly cutting her electric bills. This includes the Christmas lights she has permanently strung around the front windows. Leaving them on all night and day, she used to frequently replace the bulbs. With LED Christmas lights, she has yet to replace anything. "They have been on 24/7 for almost three years," she says. "I even unplugged them, checked the meter and checked again with them plugged in. They barely use any energy."

As for the ceiling lighting, Rees says it makes the store look neat and clean and bright. She has been experimenting with color combinations (lights come in white, blue or pink) and alternates the bulbs in each fixture. "A local professional artist told me he alternates blue and pink because it's the most natural lighting you can get. I have one I alternate and one all pink and one all blue," she says. "The pink ones light up the clothes a lot nicer."

While the customers haven't commented, Rees can recognize a difference in their behavior. "Generally they open the door and walk to the left, but now they walk to the right because the lighting is brighter," she says. "I know it has nothing to do with the clothes because I haven't changed them."

4. GO PAPERLESS

Technology and the internet have now made it possible to go paperless. Almost all banks offer statements and accept payments via the web—but what about your customers? Can they go without a receipt?

It takes about 9 million trees to create the receipt paper used in retail each year, says Isaac Lay, co-founder and CEO of allEtronic. It takes about 390 gallons of oil to produce a single ton of paper. "Wal-Mart alone uses 16 truckloads of receipt paper in a month," he says. "We did the math and were able to confirm this with a source—they use enough receipt paper in a month to go around the circumference of the earth twice."

A point-of-sale (POS) system can help you do your part by offering the option to e-mail a receipt rather than printing a hard copy. This usually works by creating a PDF of the document that is sent via e-mail

to be downloaded. But printed at home, receipts waste more paper than a store receipt.

More effective are web services, such as Lay's company, that allow customers to log on and collect receipts from all their purchases made at shops utilizing the service. Such services integrate with POS systems and other Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software. By making consumers' contact and preference information available via the web, this type of service can enhance your current loyalty program by attaching coupons, surveys and feedback questions directly to the digital receipts.

Many stores have incorporated digital receipts into their business model although the concept of an online portal—compared to email receipts—just recently hit the market. Not only environmentally friendly, paperless services are convenient. "The internet is mature, and we understand what it is used for," says Lay. "I believe customers are expecting this convenience." 

