



Publix Does It Right

To paraphrase Winston Churchill in a different context, sustainability, for much of the industry, “is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Indeed, it is fair to say that many have given up trying to understand it, resigned to simply following the dictates of big buyers or waiting for governmental regulations, such as carbon cap-and-trade or taxes on carbon emissions. This is a shame because following dictates without question is inherently impoverishing to the mind and spirit when, done well, sustainability is enriching to business and to life.

Publix Super Markets, perhaps because it's employee-owned and has such long-standing family management, has realized this. For this reason, as much as any other, we are pleased to honor Publix with the 1st-ever PRODUCE BUSINESS Award for Retail Sustainability.

Regular readers know that both here at PRODUCE BUSINESS and online at our sister publication, *PerishablePundit.com*, we have devoted much thought to issues of sustainability. What has become evident is that all too many efforts to achieve sustainable development fail because they are uninspiring to those who actually do the day-to-day work. A top-down decision is made, a certification is declared to be the goal and, like good soldiers, employees are expected to fall in line and work toward the goal of making everything “less bad” as opposed to making things good.

Not at Publix. It has found a path that encourages individual associates to seek sustainability because it is so compelling to do so. This is crucial because it is associates, doing the daily work, who are really aware of all the problems and opportunities. The decisions of big companies to build “the country's largest rooftop solar panel array” or other such high-profile items, may get a lot of publicity, but often those ventures are done for the sake of publicity. The actual return may make such capital-intensive efforts a net loss to the world as resources that could have been employed more productively were spent to generate good PR.

In contrast, Publix has built a culture that empowered an associate in the floral department to imagine and develop a recycling program for floral buckets. It may never make the front page of the newspapers, but it may help make the world a better place.

It certainly makes all Publix associates recognize their own importance. After all, isn't it fantastically inspiring to be able to say, “I'm a Publix associate and I can change the world.”? Done right, this is what sustainability does for an organization, and Publix has gotten it right.

Of course, in getting it right for Publix, it has unleashed a torrent of creativity and commitment that will enrich the industry and the world as a whole.

Many who pursue sustainability have sought to have an industry standard. It is an understandable pursuit considering the difficulties that multiple audits and standards have imposed on growers in the food safety sphere. Yet while uniform metrics make measurements easier and unified audits keep expenses down, in the end sustainability is about choices to reinforce values, and no company can surrender autonomy in this area to an industry consortium.

Sustainability is traditionally thought of as being composed of three responsibilities — environmental, social and economic — and the inclination for those new in the pursuit of sustainability is to find a balance between these responsibilities. Such a vision, though, is a chimera. There is no balance in math or logic between them and therefore, sustainability is, at its core, a matter of mindfulness in pursuit of values.

In fact, when buyers approach vendors on the subject of sustainability, they often don't do it with the proper sensitivity. It should never come across as a dictate; it should come across as a dating query — “These are our values. This is what we believe. Are we compatible?”

In the case of Publix, it has worked with vendors productively because it has not so much dictated procedures as clarified values. It is no small thing in sustainability to say that an organization will put food safety, for example, before environmentalism or that it will put product quality before carbon reduction. Yet such clarity of values is the key to enlisting aid in one's pursuit of a more sustainable future.

So many organizations have elected to align themselves with dubious science — we'll save the polar bears — or questionable social policies — Fair Trade — in pursuit not exactly of sustainability, but of media praise for meeting some pre-determined stereotype of sustainability. It is refreshing, even joyful, to award an organization that didn't apply for the award, that we had to coax into the spotlight.

Yet this too points to the benefit of pursuing sustainable development. Motivated as Publix is by its “Customer First” philosophy in pursuit of a vision of sustainability, the company has acquired new habits of transparency and conscience attention that inevitably reach deep in the company. In this sense, though winning an award such as the one granted today is meaningful, the rewards of sustainability done right are transformational in an organization.

So Publix can be a better company, make the world a better place, provide its associates a more meaningful work experience, align with vendors in a commitment beyond commerce and give consumers a chance to express who they are and wish to be through where they shop. Congratulations to Publix and its associates on the receipt of the 1st Annual PRODUCE BUSINESS Retail Sustainability Award.

Publix
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