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# It's Not Easy Selling Green



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BY DAVID GRAY

Canadian retailers have the potential to play a key role in building a sustainable future, but even they admit they aren't yet living up to that potential. The reason lies in a lot of confusion, both among shoppers and store owners, about exactly what green retail might look like.

Cynics say retail's role is irrelevant, claiming that manufacturers and others in the supply chain will tackle the majority of problems and retailers will simply line up behind these solutions. But retailers have a real opportunity to help shape sustainable behaviours among consumers.

**Big Idea**

Examples of leadership in sustainability are already emerging in Mountain Equipment Co-op, Home Depot,

Thrifty Foods Inc. and others. Such leadership takes long-term strategic planning, and retail tends to be driven by short-term thinking. However, global competition and technology innovations have forced previously complacent retailers to begin to plan strategically. Sustainability will have a similar impact.

Strategy, though, requires business end goals. Initiatives by Canadian retailers have been mostly driven by a moral belief that it is simply "the right thing to do." This thinking is noble, but it will only get us so far. We need proper business cases and drivers.

Reliance on the much-touted "green consumer" as a key driver is the biggest misconception. Experts warn that consumers will abandon stores that don't go green, but current experience doesn't support this generalization.

Retailers get mixed messages: The same shoppers seeking organic foods are also driving SUVs. Disposable fashion is hot; witness the media frenzy around the recent opening of a Lower Mainland H&M store. Even leaders such as Mountain Equipment Co-op are not seeing green demand reach the grand scale many claim exists. Lower prices, increased convenience, improved quality, brand prestige: those are what most shoppers want, and they want it now. Sure they also want green products – so long as they meet these other criteria. This reality can distract retailers from the many other excellent reasons to develop a sustainability strategy.

Perhaps a few "green" retailers can focus on what is today a market niche, while others can hasten a greener majority through education. For those who excel at retail fundamentals, "green" can elevate them in a noisy market. In addition to profit-driven waste-reduction, retailers can better compete through advantageous relationships with like-minded suppliers and buy public goodwill to buoy them through crises.

Yet the most compelling reason today for a sustainability strategy is the intense competition to hire and retain good staff in the tight labour market. While not all shop sustainably, many do aspire to work for an organization that is seen to do good things.

Retail executives not always used to long-term, holistic planning must understand that, while waste reduction is a great start, innovative vision and strategy are more critical. The entire Canadian sector must build its momentum to avoid falling behind global counterparts and being tagged a lagging industry at home. Retailers can help themselves by incubating good ideas, fostering creative start-ups and sharing practices. But a made-for-retail definition of sustainability requires boardroom priority, not off-loading to a junior level.

Help will be needed, as chains in Canada cannot fiscally match the investment by environmental leaders in other sectors. Yet the merchant's connection to the consumer makes it a prime influencer. And retailers are well suited for co-creation with suppliers, landlords and innovative sustainability companies.

For their part, sustainability experts must develop a better understanding of the retail business and adapt approaches to suit budgets, decision-making processes and business drivers that may be quite different from that of utilities or resource companies. Finally, consumers who lament inaction must acknowledge their impact on the retail system; their perceptions of "value" should incorporate the retailers' values around the environment to support change.

Opportunities exist for Canadian retail, but we need improved fact-based dialogue inside and outside of our shops and stores to get there.

**David Gray is president of Sixth Line Solutions, a retail marketing research and information consultancy.**

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