What Condoms Can Teach Us About Sustainability

Lessons in running an eco-smart business can sometimes come from unexpected places.

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Sustainability has gone from a fringe concern to a key factor in countless successful businesses in under a decade. It can be seen in everything, from finance and consumer goods, to education and transportation — not to mention condoms.

Yes, condoms.

Jeffrey and Meika Hollender are the father-daughter team who founded Sustain Natural, a nontoxic, eco-friendly vegan condom line, in 2013. As Meika Hollender told the *New York Times* last year — and as Jeffrey Hollender wrote for the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in 2015 — the latex in Sustain condoms is produced at a Fair Trade rubber plantation in India, and produced at a solar-powered factory. Most significantly, the condoms do not contain nitrosamines, which are found in many popular brands and have been tabbed as a possible carcinogen.

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"Everyone is thinking about the ingredients in their food and their makeup," Meika Hollender told the Times. "But no one is thinking about the ingredients that go in the products they put in the most intimate parts of our body."

The advent of Sustain is in keeping with Jeffrey Hollender's efforts at sustainability; he also founded Seventh Generation, which produces green cleaning products, baby diapers and laundry detergent.

It is also in keeping with a more widespread trend that has seen major players take stock of how their practices affect the outside world. In adapting to this global practice, the companies that are able to accommodate a more conscientious view are seeing the benefits. When it comes to being sustainable, one thing is for certain: it's not just for niche businesses anymore.

According to the 2016 State of Sustainable Business Survey – which included responses from 300 business leaders and 152 global companies – 49 percent of the respondents indicated that sustainability is among their CEO's top five priorities, up from 35 percent a year earlier. The survey further revealed that sustainability is at least fairly well-integrated in nearly 70 percent of companies, and 72 percent of the respondents indicated that the concept is a prominent part of the company's stated purpose.

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Faisal Hoque, the founder of a business-management company known as Shadoka, has long advocated for sustainability, going so far as to quote management guru Peter Drucker: "Indeed the modern organization was expressly created to have results on the outside, that is, to make a difference in its society or its economy."

Hoque also outlined seven fundamentals of sustainable business growth:

1. Authentic purpose
2. A powerful brand

3. Partnership and collaboration
4. Customer retention
5. Community
6. Repeatable sales
7. Flexible, adaptive leadership

Jeffrey Hollender noted in his piece for the Stanford Social Innovation Review that companies can, and should, strive to be net positive, a concept succinctly explained by *The Guardian*: Businesses have positive and negative impacts on the environment and society. For a company to be net positive, the latter need to greater than the former. Or, as the Guardian further explained: "The natural world and society should be better off with companies than without them … or so the theory says."

Jeffrey Hollender believes he has achieved that with Sustain. Besides being nitrosamine-free, his condoms are low in proteins that cause allergies and packaged in recycled materials. They are also produced in a factory, that in addition to being solar-powered, meets standards for waste reduction, water collection and energy savings, and one in which employees are paid three times the minimum wage.

Further, Sustain donates 10 percent of its profits to women's reproductive healthcare. It is employee- and female-owned, and its goal, Jeffrey Hollender writes, is empowering women — altering the negative attitudes and impacting the cultural restraints that result in what he described as "dangerously low levels of condom use among young American women."

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Jeffrey Hollender cited BT, a telecommunications giant based in the United Kingdom, as another company that has embraced sustainability. BT has set as its goal the reduction of carbon emissions by at least three times the company's current footprint by 2020.

Another European company, a home-improvement outfit known as Kingfisher, has four big goals, coupled with 12 major targets, all of them centered on saving energy and money while reducing environmental harm. The goal is to achieve all of them no later than 2025.

Then there is IKEA, the furniture retailer. Among its many initiatives, it is striving toward 100 percent renewable energy, as well as the sourcing of all its wood from more sustainable sources by 2020. According to the company's website, its various commitments have resulted in $1 billion in climate action.

Not only is it possible in this day and age to have a sustainable company, it is also increasingly a necessity.

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