

Can You Create Sustainability?

What is sustainability? This hot topic continues to capture attention in the world of business as it is about building longevity in a world full of change. According to Dow Jones **Sustainability** Index., “**corporate sustainability** is a business approach that creates long-term shareholder value by embracing opportunities and managing risks deriving from economic, environmental and social developments”.

However the Financial Times believes the definition of business sustainability is managing the triple bottom line - a process by which companies manage their financial, social and environmental risks, obligations and opportunities. These three impacts are sometimes referred to as profits, people and planet.

When you consider the environmental impact, employee relations, community interaction and societal concerns; there are numerous definitions for sustainability that reach far beyond the four walls of a business.

Sustainability versus Survival

At one time sustainability meant maintainable and workable as in long-term survival; a thriving business with a viable future. Let's take the grocery industry as an example. For many years it has been a very stable business model and changed to keep up with the times. As most mom and pop stores were slowly being devoured and merged into megalithic supermarkets, there was some change and growth such as:

- Larger stores
- Improved quality of produce
- Wider selection of products
- Organic products
- Fresher produce from local farms
- Take out sections
- Value-added products like pre-chopped veggies or cored peeled pineapples

But for the most part, it was a stable unshakeable brick-and-mortar retail business. However a nuclear bomb was dropped on the industry on June 16, 2017 when Amazon, an online retailing giant, announced the purchase of Whole Foods Markets, a premium natural and organic products nationwide supermarket.

According to Forbes Food and Agriculture contributor Neil Stern, the shockwaves around the retail industry will be reverberating for months to come. This will have an

impact not just in the grocery industry but in every facet of retail. How will competitors react? And, is Amazon done? Are more brick-and-mortar deals ahead in other retail categories as well?

Sustainability and Change

Change is truly the only constant in our universe besides death. Change is infinite and eternal. Up until now, the grocery industry seemed unflappable and put its eggs in the basket of internal expansion of product mix, size of the shopping experience and quality of selection. For the most part they totally ignored the shift in the consumer's buying preferences, a desire to stay secure, and the desire to shop from the comfort of one's home.

Up until now most consumers were shopping online for dry goods, electronics, games, toys, entertainment, household supplies. Then they expanded to home furnishings from sites like Overstock.com or Wayfair.com and purchasing services through such places as AngiesList.com and HomeAdvisor.com.

So, why not shop online for food? Specialty boutique food and grocery delivery sources have popped up everywhere within the last two years. It seems only natural to expand into online grocery.

However, is this type of change sustainable? The story is still out on whether Amazon can deliver high-end groceries to Whole Foods shoppers, Amazon shoppers and others. This innovation can easily be compared to what Kindle did to book sales and book stores. While the consumer's online options may be increasing their in-person, tactile, face-to-face experiences are declining. Is this sustainable?

How you define sustainability is your choice but you need to consider the following:

- take into consideration all the options that you know of and determine their impact
- form a group within your organization to mind map the future, taking into consideration possible Amazon-type curve balls
- do not limit your mind-mapping group to management; some of your best ideas are hiding in your production line or your IT department
- don't just think outside of the box, get outside of the box – go to a park, the beach or somewhere that will allow the creative juices to flow
- adopt the approach that there are no bad suggestions and explore each one

Adopting survivability as part of your definition of sustainability might prevent the curve ball turning into a homerun for the other team.

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