

How to Prepare a Sustainability Policy

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The seemingly overnight demand for sustainable green printing has become one of the most significant issues printers are being asked to address. Sustainable green printing is being driven mainly by print customers looking to green their own business, operations, and products. As a result, they are requiring all of their suppliers to respond accordingly by providing printed products that are more sustainable and are manufactured in a manner that reduces the overall environmental impact.

Printers can no longer afford to ignore the issues of sustainability and resource conservation. Not only is the health of the Earth's environment for future generations at stake, but a company's future profitability will be tied directly to how well it addresses today's emerging sustainable manufacturing issues. In order to capitalize on the movement and turn it into a competitive advantage, printers need to have an approach that is both systematic and systemic. The question is: How do you formulate a rational approach and create a plan that can gain support at all levels within your company? The answer is by creating a Sustainability Policy, the basis of a Sustainable Management System (SMS).

What Is the Purpose of a Sustainability Policy?

The Sustainability Policy serves as a company's public statement for its management and employees, plus a communication tool for its customers, vendors, and other interested parties. It is heart and soul of a program as it explicitly states the value, commitment, and goals of an organization. The policy needs to be integrated into the set of parameters or guideposts any printer uses to make decisions on products it will manufacture, technology that will be used for production, and all supporting activities such as maintenance, transportation, energy, etc.

Once the policy is developed, it must *not* be placed on a shelf to be forgotten or only made visible when requested by a customer. It needs to be shared with management, employees, customers, vendors, and other interested parties. Ideally it should be made public through the company's website. The policy also needs to be revisited periodically to see if it still reflects the company's value with respect to sustainability.

The development of a Sustainability Policy is also a critical step in gaining recognition by the Sustainable Green Printing Partnership (www.sgppartnership.org). In order for a printer to be recognized as either a Candidate Pending Verification or a Sustainable Green Printer, they must have a formal Sustainability Policy, signed by an owner or responsible corporate official, and posted in a prominent public location.

What Is Sustainability?

Ideas and concepts embodied by sustainability need to be understood. In the general sense, sustainability has become a term that encompasses ecological and environmental goals to help mitigate a broad spectrum of scientific, social, and political issues. These include pollution reduction, mitigating climate change, protecting endangered species, globalization, corporate social responsibility, and more. Supporters of "green" politics share many ideas for ecology, conservation, and the environment. With so many different competing interests, the concept of sustainability becomes confusing and, at times, conflicting.

Sustainability implies the ability to operate in a way that meets present needs while providing for the needs of the future and future generations. Sustainable manufacturing has emerged to define a socially, environmentally, and resource-responsible approach to manufacturing. Sustainable manufacturing for the printing industry embodies three principal concepts:

- **Product.** This includes the design, input materials used to make it, and the ultimate fate of the finished goods.
- **Process.** This includes the actual manufacturing process involving prepress, press, and postpress.
- **Envelope.** This includes all of the support activities that occur at a printing operation such as the building, grounds, maintenance, transportation, employees, etc.

Sustainability is much broader than the input materials used to produce a given printed product. In short, sustainability is more than just printing a product on recycled paper with “vegetable oil-based” inks. Sustainability requires an examination of all the aspects involved in a company’s operation.

What Are the Essential Elements of a Sustainability Policy?

In order for a policy to address the core sustainability concepts and meet the criteria established by the Sustainable Green Printing Partnership, there are four areas that must be specifically included and they are commitments to compliance, continuous improvement, pollution prevention, and communication. The elements in the policy are designed to address the core principle aspects of sustainability that reflect what the company has put into place via their SMS.

It is also important to understand the policy can address other elements deemed important by the company. The policy must be constructed in such a manner that it addresses the following items:

- **Be focused.** The most important aspect of the policy is that it needs to clearly state the company’s vision statement and present core values and principles. The policy is meant to provide inspired leadership that establishes the framework for the policies and procedures that will be implemented to meet the stated objectives.
- **Contain relevant content.** If the policy’s content is not relevant to the company’s existing culture and operation, it might do more harm than good.
- **Be signed and dated.** The policy statement should be signed and dated at the very least by the owner or a responsible corporate official. Signatures demonstrate a personal commitment by the highest company official on the premises. If the names change, they should be updated by the new responsible officials as quickly as possible.
- **Posted.** The policy statement should be posted on the company’s website and at the facility in a place where all employees and visitors can readily see it. The best location is in the entrance lobby next to the building’s receptionist.

Once the policy is developed, it cannot be allowed to remain stagnant or its value as a mechanism as the central component in a sustainability program will diminish. It needs to be managed so it remains fresh and reflects changes in the company’s position,

technology, and accomplishments. Policy management includes, as a minimum, the following actions:

- **Reviewed and renewed.** It should be reviewed annually to ensure current applicability and revised as appropriate.
- **Audited for conformance.** While companies and sites are frequently audited for conformance with regulatory and procedural requirements, few audit for conformance with their environmental policy. This is the ultimate in credible corporate governance because any deviations in conformance with the policy will be leading indicators of problems yet to come.
- **Have supporting documents and resources.** These help employees understand and implement the policy, as well as cross-reference to other relevant company documents and provide contact assistance.

Where Do I Start?

In order to gain the maximum value, develop a sense of ownership by management and staff, empower employees, and promote the company’s commitment to sustainability, the very *first* step is to have management commitment and support. If management does not allocate the resources to the policy development, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for it to be a meaningful endeavor. Even though many printing operations are staffed very lean and time is one of the most precious commodities, those companies that have successfully embraced sustainability understand the need and find ways to dedicate the necessary resources as they realize that becoming more sustainable is now a critical component to continuing their business.

The *second* step is to form a committee. While at first, this may seem to be a bureaucratic exercise that wastes time, it will actually serve a broader goal. The committee should be representative of the key operational areas such as management, sales, accounting, purchasing, quality control, customer service, the various production operations, environmental and safety compliance professionals, and maintenance. For smaller companies, there will be fewer individuals, but the people responsible for each of these areas need to be included. Relegating the policy development to an individual will not be as effective as the goal is to have the policy serve as the primary mechanism for spreading sustainability throughout the organization. While having a champion is critical to getting the program started, the goal is to turn all of the employees into champions and ambassadors for the company.

Developing the policy may require several meetings to allow for the exchange of ideas, discussions, and the development of statements that reflect the company’s position on the core policy elements. The discussions need to lead to the development of a draft policy that will be circulated for consideration and suggestions for revisions. In order to keep the policy focused, it should be no more than one page in length.

In order to minimize the amount of time dedicated, the best approach is to have a plan for the policy's development translated into an agenda for the meeting. The agenda needs to be circulated prior to the meeting, identifying the topics to be discussed, who will be responsible for each of the agenda items, and, most importantly, have a start and ending time for each topic that is adhered to.

How Do I Actually Write the Policy?

The best approach is to start by preparing a list of general concerns related to sustainability that could be addressed in the policy statement. These general concerns need to address environmental impacts associated with the product being produced including prepress, press, and postpress operations, the packaging and transportation of the finished goods, the composition and delivery of input materials, as well as the impact from operating the printing facility that includes energy consumption, building, grounds, and equipment maintenance, office waste, food/cafeteria waste, etc.

The concerns can also address employee issues such as health and safety, wellness, and other benefits plus those that address the surrounding community. Community issues can include the release of air pollutants that can cause short-term problems such as odor or longer-term ones such as smog. Frequent deliveries and shipments can increase air pollution from vehicles, noise, and congestion. Other concerns could include improper disposal of hazardous waste leading to contamination of soil and groundwater, excess solid waste filling up landfills, and noise pollution from equipment on the outside of the building.

Regarding the environmental concerns, the focus should be on those that cause changes to the environment, whether adverse or beneficial, that result from the company's activities, products, or services. Most elements of business operations will have environmental aspects, intended or unintended.

For example, an unintended impact of using a cleaning solvent may be volatile (airborne) emissions produced during use. The "impact" of these emissions may be hazardous exposure for workers or the community or a contribution to smog formation. Another example is the generation of hazardous waste which contains chemicals that could interact with the environment if they are not disposed of properly. The chemicals in the hazardous waste would be an environmental concern because the chemicals pose a threat to human health and the environment. The improper release of these chemicals into a landfill would be an environmental impact.

Once the list of general concerns is identified, they need to be translated into commitments. It is important to think through which commitments the company will be capable of addressing. Do not include commitments in the policy the company will not be able to carry out.

An important consideration of the policy is its scope. Decide whether it will include activities beyond internal operations, such as

supplier environmental performance or customer product use. Remember to consider the company's property beyond plant walls up to the "fence line." Consider how to include contractors working at the site, and consider the companies used for outsourcing.

Issues that do not fall within the boundaries set for the policy statement should be dropped. As the company gains experience and becomes comfortable with the process, the scope can always be expanded to include environmental issues important to customers, suppliers, employees, and the community.

Once the list of specific issues and commitments are identified, a draft of the policy should be prepared and circulated for feedback and possible revisions. The policy should be succinct and be no more than one page in length.

The specific issues and commitments should be written in general terms. For example, if chemicals in the water or air are a concern because they potentially impact the community, a commitment could be written to review and, where feasible, make changes in the chemicals used by the company or make sure chemicals are being managed appropriately. Or, if solid waste in landfills is a concern, a commitment can be included to reduce the solid waste produced.

Next, think about how to put commitments into action. For example, a commitment to reduce solid waste may be achieved through a pollution prevention program and/or a program to design products or services that result in minimal waste generated by the consumer. Also, these programs may be implemented one at a time over a several year period as part of your commitment to continuing improvement.

What Commitments Need to Be Included?

For those printers seeking recognition under the Sustainable Green Printing Partnership, there are four elements that must be included to meet the criteria. As a minimum, the policy must have statements that clearly address each of the following commitments:

- Compliance with environmental, health, and safety requirements
- Continuous improvement, including areas not subject to regulation
- Pollution prevention that emphasizes source reduction, reuse, and recycling
- Sharing information on sustainability performance with external stakeholders

In addition, the following more specific principles can also be included in the policy statement:

- Prevent accidents.
- Identify opportunities for risk reduction associated with the processes and chemicals used in your plant, the supplies procured, the products produced, and the disposal of waste products.

- Consider the life cycle (from raw materials extraction, processing to use, and eventual disposal) of products produced, including packaging, so as to affect how suppliers and end users impact the environment through your products.
- Continuous improvement of cleaner technologies and processes and in the safer use of chemicals.
- Practice wise resource management, including conservation of limited resources and reuse and recycling of materials.

Summary and Conclusion

A sustainability policy is your company's declaration of commitment to the environment and worker health and safety. This policy serves as the foundation for your Sustainable Management System and provides a unifying vision of sustainability principles that will guide the actions of both employees and management.

While the idea of developing an SMS and a policy may seem foreign due to its relative newness to printers, its roots go back at least twenty years. Due to the demands from a rapidly growing base of customers, the interest in sustainability has really skyrocketed in the past two years. The printing industry is clearly in the midst of a fundamental change in the manner in which business is conducted. As a result, a printer's ability to stay competitive and profitable is directly

tied to their ability to meet this new challenge. The sustainability policy statement serves as the framework for setting objectives and targets that will drive those business activities which will result in increased profits while simultaneously protecting people and the planet.

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