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Businesses show leadership in their sustainability efforts

By Ryan Randazzo, The Arizona Republic

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. is examining hybrid-diesel trucks for its massive fleet.

Dial Corp. is producing concentrated detergents to reduce packaging waste.

Arizona Public Service Co. is saving \$450,000 a year by shutting down computer monitors in its Phoenix headquarters.

Cox Communications is allowing service technicians to begin their daily route from home rather than commute to a garage to pick up their service vehicles.

Intel Corp. is developing microchips that cut the amount of energy wasted in home electronics.

These are a few of the hundreds of examples that eight of the state's largest employers shared regarding how they are profiting from sustainability as nearly 200 people gathered for the Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry's Sustainability Summit at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Phoenix on Friday.

"Sustainability is about making money," said Ed Fox, vice president and chief sustainability officer for APS. "Sustainability is a business strategy."

He encouraged business executives to "stop thinking about sustainability as a green movement," because that "makes the finance guys think of additional costs."

Instead, he said APS encourages employees to look for ways to save the company money, like the idea to shut down energy-wasting computer monitors when they're not in use. The company borrowed the idea from a local school that was pinching pennies.

Aside from the well-publicized solar-power plants and other conservation-oriented projects, APS is integrating sustainability into performance reviews "so that employees know it is important to them," he said.

That's important because many employers might assume that because they are in inherently polluting industries, such as mining, that their employees might not buy into sustainable concepts, he said.

"We burn coal, we get it," Fox said, adding that the employees at APS coal plants are among those most focused on minimizing pollution.

Besides internal initiatives, customers' standards on the subject are rising.

"Customers expect green," Fox said. "They don't necessarily want to pay for it, but they expect it."

Other companies that presented sustainable initiatives included Salt River Project, Southwest Gas Corp. and Sundt Construction Co.

Ruediger Vetter, vice president of business development and sustainability for Dial, said that the combination of Al Gore's movie An Inconvenient Truth and Hurricane Katrina were the equivalent of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks for the sustainability movement, causing a tipping point among consumers.

"There are shades of green," Vetter said of consumer attitudes about the environment.

"But the number of unconcerned people is getting smaller and smaller."

He said that in his native Germany, where the population density is much higher than that of the United States, consumers have been quicker to pick up on environmental concepts because the government mandates them.

"It's not slow," he said of the trend toward sustainability. "You're just late."

He spoke of the company's commitment to make less-polluting consumer products, such as soaps and lotions, use less energy making and shipping them, and maintain its profit margins.

Some attendees liked what they heard.

"It is encouraging to see that they are taking the steps they are taking voluntarily, not because they are mandated to do those things," said Enrique Lopezlira, policy director for Western Progress.

The non-profit promotes "progressive policy solutions" such as alternative energy in eight Western states.

"I also liked that they are talking to their suppliers making sure that their efforts are sustainable," he said.

One alternative opinion at the summit came from Stan Barnes, a Phoenix lobbyist and publicist who spoke on behalf of Arizonans for Electric Choice and Competition. He focused his talk on the possible negative effects of global-warming legislation.

Lopezlira said Barnes' talk was discouraging because it didn't give enough credit to the myriad ways in which industry can reduce energy waste.

"It shows some education still needs to happen," Lopezlira said.

Barnes opened his presentation by poking fun at Vetter, who commented on the unsustainable choice many attendees made by drinking from paper coffee cups.

"I feel really bad," Barnes kidded as he set his paper cup on the lectern.

Barnes also joked about the media's coverage of polar bears in jeopardy from melting pack ice and said he hopes the government can refrain from "overregulating in an irrational manner."

Barnes said that even if business leaders disagree with the politics of global warming, they can find opportunity in the changes that will come as companies look to increase efficiency.

"Many don't buy into the man-made global-warming phenomenon, but they must adapt to the political reality," he said. "You can be in denial all you want about the science. That's OK. It is a political fact, and they need to adjust and operate in that new reality."

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