Going Green with E-Business

Online business was developed over the last few decades to increase profits and efficiency. However with the green issue at the forefront of many organisational initiatives, e-business has become a welcome asset for supporting the environment. While many are concerned about hosting and recycling of computer equipment, online business is a champion for paper and fuel reduction. How can businesses implement e-business efficiently and cost-effectively to support green initiatives?

E-Business by its very nature reduces an organisation's carbon footprint. The biggest challenge and concern about digital business however relate to electricity costs for hosting. With recent improvements to solar power technologies, solar powered hosting has become more and more reliable and affordable. There are also a number of information management tactics we can employ to decrease the volume of power required to run our hosting. These include not only IT activities, but more importantly the way each individual in an organisation works with information.

There are a variety of organisations using online business to promote or generate revenue from the green issue. 'Greentech' (greentechmedia.com) make money from downloadable research articles and papers, which are sold a premium, as well as online advertising and events. There are also a number of online social networking sites such as Edenbee.com and Greenvoice.com, which allow businesses and individuals to campaign and educate eachother about green issues. One thing is clear, when it comes to any ethical issue such as 'Green', social media is a valuable asset in helping us support and collaboratively work together to improve the environment. However, with so much activity and duplicated information being generated from social media discussions and recommendations, the electricity required to run the server disks for social media means that there is a downside.

Here are some useful lessons to support your eco-friendly company and e-business initiatives.

E-Lesson 1: Use solar powered hosting

Use affordable environmentally friendly hosting at solar powered data centres. Many hosting centers use diesel generators to as a backup to solar power energy. Source a hosting company, which uses a generator running on propane gas. Propane has a cleaner way of burning energy than diesel, does not emit large amounts of carbon dioxide and produces no sulfur dioxide or other. Additionally, as propane vaporises rapidly, it won't contaminate soil or groundwater should there be a leakage from the generator. You can also investigate whether your hosting provider's data centre is draft resistant, as this can reduce server cooling or heating energy by up to 50%.

E-Lesson 2: Ditch paper for digital

Virtually anything we do on paper can be converted to digital. Use online account statements and billing rather than sending statements and invoices in the post. You will not only reduce paper usage, but also fuel used during the delivery process.   Online accounts, billing and reporting are not only great for the environment and more convenient for your customers, but can also help search engine ranking through repeat visits.   You can even offer downloadable free and purchasable products such as e-books instead of sending expensive printed materials. Use Internet marketing activities such email marketing instead of direct mail marketing, and use digital advertising instead of print. All of these are great for the environment, but also for your budget.

E-Lesson 3: Avoid duplicate digital information

Every piece of digital information that you create, copy or distribute takes up space on a hard disk or other storage technology. Electricity is required to make that storage media accessible. So if you have lots of unnecessary copies of the same information, you will need more electricity to run those hard disks. This concept can be applied to the Internet, intranets and extranets where information may be duplicated by different departments. For an Internet site, duplicated data potentially affects search engine ranking as well storage wastage and additional energy. With that said, it is incredibly important to ensure that backups of all your online data is made and stored securely, and that technology and procedures are in place if your web site server goes down.

E-Lesson 4: Plan your product supply chain carefully

According to industry reports 75% of a company's carbon footprint derives from transportation and logistics. This high figure has significant ethical implications for retailers and e-commerce businesses, not only for product shipping but also for movement of products from supplier to warehouse, and warehouse to distribution centre.

Several lessons can be learned from large retailers such as Walmart who are taking on supply chain management for carbon footprint reduction. While Walmart are a giant with a target to reduce 20 million metric tons of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2015, small and medium-sized businesses can each make an impact. Collectively the impact will be even higher.   Investigate your whole supply chain, and see where transportation can be reduced. Consider collaborating with other retail and wholesale businesses to move and ship products. If your deliveries aren't outsourced, ensure that delivery vans are as full as possible. If you can't fill them, consider sharing your vans with another retailer and sharing the costs. You will not only save on money, but also reduce carbon emissions.

E-Lesson 5: Use online conferencing to reduce travel fuels

Online conferencing and presentations are not only low-cost ways of meeting with your clients, employees and suppliers globally, but also reduce the financial costs and fuel usage associated with travel. Businesses can employ a number of tools such as Skype and secure online training and meeting centres to conduct business. mple. When you meet online, the quality of communication will never be quite the same as face-to-face, but like any activity, a business case decision should be made on what meeting methods should be used. Thankfully, the advent of webcam and video technologies for online conferencing, have further enabled virtual working, and so this reduces fuel pollution during the rush hour, when employees would otherwise be travelling to work.

Online business is not only important for increasing profits, lowering business costs and increasing efficiency, but is also your strongest asset for supporting the environment. E-Business is no longer a luxury but an absolute necessity, and if conducted using best-practice advice, any enterprise has the power to become an eco-friendly business.

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For high-impacting practical learning on how to plan and manage the implementation and marketing for online business, take a look at our COB Certified Manager Series at COBCertified.com