A company’s reputation for sustainability is as important, if not more important, as the green products and services that it sells.

Although challenges in the economy have been at the forefront of discussion around spending the past couple of years, environmental sustainability is more important for businesses now than ever. Product purchasers and consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the sustainability efforts of the companies they support, so a company’s reputation for sustainability is as important as the green products and services it sells.

According to a survey conducted by United Stationers, 39% of consumers and 44% of product purchasers deem a company’s reputation for sustainability as very important when purchasing for the workplace. It did not come as a surprise to the research team that the most important criteria are quality (the product has to perform the function for which it is purchased) and ease of reordering (convenience). But the rapid rise of sustainability is surprising, as overall it edges out price, brand recognition and additional services associated with the product as important considerations. There are differences by product category, but quality is always the number one position, and sustainability never falls far from the top in the mind of the purchaser even as budget concerns focus attention on price.

Examining specific workplace product categories, technology equipment users look toward a company’s reputation for sustainability more than purchasers of other categories, with 52% of consumers and 51% of purchasers ranking a company’s reputation for sustainability as important. In the tech category, the importance of brand replaces ease of reordering in the number two spot. For the office furniture and industrial supply categories, a company’s reputation for sustainability is only surpassed by the quality of the product.

The significance of sustainability means opportunity for companies and brands that put an emphasis on their sustainability efforts. It is no longer enough to carry products with “green” attributes—the heart of the green opportunity is for companies to demonstrate that they are as sustainable as the products they carry.

Historically, consumers put pressure on suppliers to “walk the talk” when it comes to sustainability. For suppliers who have worked hard on their sustainability initiatives, there is an opportunity now to “talk the walk” as well—to proudly build awareness of their sustainability efforts.
Where does “green” factor into the purchasing decision for workplace products?

Purchasers and consumers of workplace products are very particular about product attributes that they believe are important, and these attributes are major players in what products purchasers buy and consumers use.

First and foremost, 50% of consumers and 59% of purchasers believe that quality is the most important attribute, meaning it’s identified as the most important consideration in choosing a product for the workplace. Products purchased for the job must perform the function for which they are purchased. Workers rely on these products. For purchasing agents, the products they choose for the workplace are representative of the job that they are doing.

Ease of reordering is the second most important attribute, with 44% of consumers and 52% of purchasers indicating the attribute as very important, and highest for office supplies and breakroom products. These product categories are also frequently stocked in the workplace by an administrative worker who reorders when supplies run low. The admin may also be ordering for a department, where consistency of product in a supply cabinet averts employee dissatisfaction.

Finally, a company’s reputation for sustainability ranks third with 39% of consumers and 44% of purchasers believing that sustainability is very important. With company transparency becoming a key trend across industries, especially in regard to sustainability, companies that want to sell products have to make sustainability a priority.

Key Questions

Are green products important?

- Yes, a product with “green” attributes is viewed as very important to both consumers (24%) and purchasers (23%). While almost half as important as company sustainability as a buying trigger, “green” product attributes rate above product style in selecting a workplace product.

What about the quality of green products?

- Both consumers and purchasers perceive “green” products as high quality, which is an important point to emphasize given that quality is the single most important attribute for workplace products. About 45% of purchasers of “green” products do so because of their perceived better quality.

Will people pay more for green?

- While consumers and purchasers are price-sensitive, they will not sacrifice quality, convenience or environmental impact. Price as an attribute ranks fourth for consumers and ties with brand recognition for fourth place among purchasers. Customers of workplace products, whether or not they purchase the products themselves, prefer a company with a good reputation over a company with a cheaper product. Consumer preference for sustainability is good news for manufacturers, as they should have market support for further investment in their environmental impact reduction initiatives.
Product Manufacturers’ Perspective

Like consumers and purchasers, manufacturers of office products are increasingly valuing sustainability. In research conducted by United Stationers with the product supply community in June 2011, suppliers are realizing the importance of having a positive reputation for sustainability, and this is also being demonstrated by suppliers’ actions.

- **Suppliers list sustainability as part of their mission or overall company goals.** Fully 95% of suppliers say that they believe that being environmentally sustainable is a priority within their company.

- **More than half (57%) of suppliers already carry products with “green” attributes** and continue to invest in new “green” product development.

- **Suppliers are becoming more transparent.** More than a third of the suppliers surveyed report their sustainability efforts either publicly through a third party or via a reseller or industry scorecard.

- **Almost all (96%) suppliers participate in a recycling program.** Recycling opportunities throughout the product manufacturing process are being identified, and when leveraged, this typically also results in cost-savings.

- **Suppliers are taking the initiative to reduce product packaging.** In fact, 95% of the suppliers surveyed participate in a packaging reduction program. The most common initiatives utilized are shipping with smaller boxes and recycling packaging.

- **Suppliers believe the market for “green” products is large and growing.** About 64% believe that the market for “green” products is in the billions to trillions of dollars. With suppliers believing that there is such a large market for “green” products, the future opportunities within the “green” product realm look like they will support investments in product development.

Historically, consumers put pressure on suppliers to “walk the talk” when it comes to sustainability. For suppliers who have worked hard on their sustainability initiatives, there is an opportunity now to “talk the walk” as well – to proudly build awareness of their sustainability efforts.
How can resellers leverage these trends for their advantage?

Sustainability has become a priority throughout the supply chain from supplier to end user, which creates an opportunity for every phase of the supply chain to become more sustainable. For resellers, this means many opportunities to demonstrate social responsibility and solidify customer relationships.

**BRAND, CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE, and COMMUNITY**

A company that is more transparent is better positioned to garner more **customer business**. As more consumers demand that companies walk-the-talk when they sell green products, companies will need to show their consumers that their “green” actions don’t just revolve around their products.

**But talk-the-walk is just as important;** companies may lose the opportunity to gain market share if their consumers aren’t aware of the efforts the company is making to lessen their impact on the environment.

Every step toward **sustainability helps**. Educating oneself about “green” product offerings positions you to be a resource to others. Recommending an appropriate “green solution” adds value.

**Sustainability encompasses the entire supply chain.** Sustainability is a process that the entire supply chain is involved in—from manufacturer to end-users. Ask questions. What would your customers like to see? Use their tips to better align yourself with the message and actions of sustainability.

Leverage **“single source” and “buy local” and messages**. Reducing the number of sources saves time, reduces cost, and helps lessen the strain on resources. Doing business locally means working with people who understand each other’s business, and tax dollars stay in the community for common benefit.

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United Stationers Inc. is a leading wholesale distributor of business products, with 2010 net sales of approximately $4.8 billion. The company stocks approximately 100,000 items, including technology products, traditional office products, janitorial and breakroom supplies, office furniture, and industrial supplies. A network of 64 distribution centers allows it to deliver these products to over 25,000 reseller customers. This network, combined with United's depth and breadth of inventory, enables the company to ship most products overnight to more than 90% of the U.S. and major cities in Mexico. For more information, visit [www.unitedstationers.com](http://www.unitedstationers.com). United Stationers' common stock trades on the NASDAQ Global Select Market under the symbol USTR.

The Research & Analytics Group of United Stationers brings understanding of the consumer into the business, including emerging market trends and category insights; the team leverages experience, education, and a robust set of research and analytical tools.