

Green Behind the Scenes

5 Sustainability Trends the Others are Missing

By Adam Stone

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Wind turbines, electro-cars, Earth-friendly detergents. News stories have tackled Green basics *ad nauseam*. Editors need a fresh take on the social juggernaut of sustainability. Readers want to know more, but they don't want more of the same. How will the media sustain sustainability?

There's plenty of Green going on behind the scenes. Whether readers are C-suite chiefs or consumers on the street, they still have a lot to learn beyond the already-familiar headlines. In fact, there's no end of environmental activity percolating in quiet corners, often overlooked by the press.

The untold stories of Green affect every sector and can be reflected in every publication, from general interest to niche trade. These are stories of food, technology, manufacturing, employee management – they touch on every aspect of our personal lives and our commercial activities.

What follows are five atypical trends, meant to give editors an edge: New angles for new stories. For every trend that's been done to death, this report proposes, there are new and different stories waiting to be written.

Tearing down technology

The push is on to strip down power-sucking data centers

That little bit of heat that comes off the back of your desktop or the bottom of your laptop? Multiply it by a billion. Often overlooked in sustainability coverage, data center power consumption has lately drawn the attention corporate and government users: They're scrambling to find ways to lighten the power-load.

As far back as 2005, U.S. data centers and their related infrastructure were already sucking up five million kilowatts of energy, the equivalent of five 1,000-megawatt power plants.¹ The ever-increasing demand is now raising eyebrows.

The push for better data center management began at the top, with a call by Federal Chief Information Officer Vivek Kundra to get control of the government's own IT-based

¹ AMD, *Estimating Total Power Consumption by Servers in the U.S. and the World*, Feb. 2007

energy usage. The number of federal data centers grew from 432 in 1998 to more than 2,000 in 2011, a trend mirrored in the private sector. Kundra called for closing 800 of the government's more than 2,000 centers by 2015.²

Corporate America is responding too. AT&T took a hard look at its data centers in 2011, aiming to improve energy efficiency by 17 percent despite fast-growing demands for processing power.³ Facebook is using solar panels to generate juice for its 300,000-square-foot data center in Prineville, Oregon.

As a news hook that reaches across industry sectors and reader interests, data centers remain largely overlooked.

Sustainable packaging

Throwing extra wrapping in the trash

What's bigger than a breadbox? The box it comes in. Consumers are increasingly frustrated with the wrapping that encases their purchases, everything from electronics (merely aggravating) to kids' toys (exquisite torture).

It's not just the frustration of breaking into the box, but the box itself. People are asking themselves, and the environmental community echoes the concern: Why does my eco-friendly spring water come in a bottle that's going to sit in a landfill indefinitely?

There is action afoot to trim the waste. The Sustainable Packaging Coalition for instance has articulated a largely overlooked packaging manifesto. To pass muster, packages must be:

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- beneficial, safe & healthy for individuals and communities
- sourced, manufactured, transported and recycled using renewable energy
- manufactured using clean production technologies

More than just a market niche, low-impact packaging is a sustainability trend that will only grow in prominence. The global sustainable packaging market is projected to expand at a compound annual rate of 14 percent through 2014, driven primarily by the need to comply with a variety of regulatory norms.⁴

Growth in this arena represents a potential editorial opportunity for outlets savvy enough to seize on it. Few have so far.

² Vivek Kundra, *Cracking Down on Wasteful, Duplicative Spending*. May 03, 2011.

³ AT&T, *Meet the Possibility Economy, 2010 AT&T Sustainability Report*.

⁴ TechNavio, *Global Green (Sustainable) Packaging Market 2010–2014*.

Green Employee Engagement

Marshal the troops to help boost the bottom line

Businesses increasingly are looking to their employees to spread the message of sustainability. It's a win-win. The company cuts costs when employees shut the lights on the way out. Employees get to feel that, even at work, they can be doing their part.

Employee sustainability engagement is defined broadly as the practice of promoting efficiency, resource conservation and other sustainability initiatives to drive changes in staff behavior. Corporations may use education, incentives or specific policy mandates to get their employees into the game.

Employers increasingly are recognizing the power of engagement. Eighty-eight percent of major corporations are planning to invest significantly in employee engagement in 2012, according to a recent sustainability study by Green Research.⁵

88% of major corporations plan to invest significantly in employee engagement in 2012

In one recent report, the National Environmental Education Foundation singled out Stonyfield Farm as an example of what can happen when employees are

engaged in the work of sustainability. Stonyfield has challenged its employees to save energy at company facilities, with savings tied to employee bonuses for all workers. As a result, the company has reduced energy use per ton of product by more than 22 percent.⁶

Sprint's employee environmental-awareness campaign asks workers to help the company achieve its environmental goals, including energy usage management, trash reduction, and smarter commuting.

The drive toward employee engagement sweeps across economic sectors, and with good reason: Businesses are feeling Wall Street heat. In a survey by Brighter Planet, 23 percent of organizations said investor pressure was a motivating factor driving their sustainability programs.⁷

Corporate Green has received increasing coverage in the media, as companies in diverse sectors find ways to ease their burden on the earth. But employee engagement has stood outside the limelight – a story waiting to be told.

⁵ Green Research, *Corporate Sustainability Leaders to Focus on Employee Engagement and Supply Chain in 2012*.

⁶ National Environmental Education Foundation, *Toward Engagement 2.0: Creating a More Sustainable Company Through Employee Engagement*. Sept. 2011.

⁷ Brighter Planet, *Greening the Workplace 2011 -- Engaging Employees to Benefit the Planet and the Bottom Line*, Dec. 2011.

Honest partners

Businesses search out authentic Green vendors

In their zeal to go Green, business leaders may be opening the door too wide. So enthusiastic are they to show customers and shareholders their socially responsible stance, so eager to do the right thing, they may be getting mutton dressed as lamb – or tap water in an Aquafina bottle, as it turns out.

Even the best-meant environmental initiatives can be undermined by an unscrupulous vendor

Few standards exist to determine what products are “Green” or “environmentally friendly” or “sustainable.” Even the best-meant environmental initiatives can be undermined by an unscrupulous vendor willing to misrepresent the virtues of a product. Underreported news hook: Corporations are getting scammed.

A company may fill the stock room with a recycled product whose production consumed multiple times more energy than the conventional version. Institutions may serve organic food that bears no third-party validation. Then there are the irrelevant claims: So what if it’s “CFC free,” when CFCs have been outlawed since the late 1980s?

The media have sparked consumer interest in so-called Greenwashing: 75 percent of Americans wish businesses would give better explanations of the environmental benefits their products will have, according to the 2011 Green Gap Trend Tracker⁸. But the impact of bogus claims on the business community remains unexplored, a story waiting to be told.

Beneficial bean

High protein, low impact soy is changing more than just our diets

Among the most overlooked Green heroes is the lowly bean – soy bean, to be precise. More than just a way to fill our bellies with ersatz burger, soy beans are increasingly being embraced by eco-advocates as an environmentally sustainable alternative to other harvests.

That’s a news story. The United Nations has called for a 50 percent increase in food production by 2030, and soy likely will play a major part in that. It’ll change the way we eat and dramatically change our agricultural landscape.

It’s a Green story, too. Soy is a highly efficient form of protein and can reduce the production burden on resource-intensive livestock and fishing industries. The crop has direct environmental benefits: Some varieties of soy for example have been bred to

⁸ Cone Communications, *2011 Green Gap Trend Tracker*, March 2011

require fewer herbicides. Soy also is oil-rich, making it a robust addition to biofuels, which in turn help wean us off fossil fuels.⁹

Soybeans themselves are easy on the Earth. Since 1987, the amount of energy used to produce a bushel of soybeans has dropped by about 65 percent, according to the Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture.¹⁰

Soy beans have all the makings of a tasty sustainability story, but they rarely make headlines.

About the Author

Award-winning journalist Adam Stone has covered the business community for more than 20 years. His stories exploring trends in health care, technology, finance, government and hospitality have appeared in general interest publications and trade magazines nationwide. He is co-author, with Fran Claps, of *Lehigh Valley: Crossroads of Commerce* (Cherbo Publishing, Feb. 2008).



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⁹ USB Thinking Ahead, The United Soybean Board.

¹⁰ The Keystone Centre, *Field to Market: The Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture*, 2009.

Appendix

Sustainability Resources for Editors

For editors seeking authoritative news and sources on sustainability and Green business issues.

- **GreenBiz.com -- www.greenbiz.com**

A leading source for news, opinion and other resources on the greening of mainstream business.

- **National Wildlife Federation -- www.nwf.org**

“Inspiring Americans to protect wildlife for our children’s future.”

- **US Green Buildings Council -- www.usgbc.org**

Non-profit organization dedicated to sustainable building design and construction.

- **Center for Biological Diversity -- www.biologicaldiversity.org**

Working to secure “a future for all species, great or small, hovering on the brink of extinction.”

- **US Environmental Protection Agency -- www.epa.gov**

An agency of the federal government charged with protecting human health and the environment

- **Eco Trust -- www.ecotrust.org**

Inspiring fresh thinking that creates economic opportunity, social equity and environmental well-being.

- **Sustainable Energy Coalition -- www.sustainableenergycoalition.org**

A consortium of more than 20 national and state-level business, environmental, consumer and energy policy organizations.