

Businesses aim to get competitive by tackling climate change



By Brock Weir

There was once a time when businesses turned the other cheek when it came to talking about climate change, worried about the impact trying to make a difference might have on their bottom line.

But, a lot has happened over the past two decades and the world is a very different place – both environmentally and economically. “Much has changed in society with perceptions of climate change,” says Brent Kopperson, Executive Director of Aurora's Windfall Ecology Centre. “We're now at a point where to be a climate denier puts you in a very skeptical place with the vast majority of the population and climate science is pretty clear.

“There are all kinds of examples of businesses big and small that are actually beginning to understand that sustainability practices in their business is good business because they've learned it improves their bottom line and it has an impact on employee retention and recruitment and overall brand and imaging.”

So, it high time to pool resources and help businesses get that competitive edge through sustainability.

Windfall, in association with Sustainability CoLab, formally launched the ClimateWise Business Network last week.

A target-based sustainability program, it focuses on helping businesses set targets for reducing their emissions and is the first of its kind in York Region.

Windfall launched the program at Aw, Shucks! last week in the aim of ClimateWise becoming a “hub for York Region's low-carbon economy.”

“Becoming a founding member of ClimateWise was an obvious choice for the LSRCA,” said Mike Walters, CAO of the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority. “One of our primary corporate goals is to develop strategies that build resiliency to climate change within our watershed communities, so it makes good sense that we do everything we can to reduce our own environmental footprint.”

The LSRCA is just one partner organization in ClimateWise, among the Region of York and Power Stream. ClimateWise is one of eight non-profits across Ontario operating programs focused on engaging businesses on the environment and creating target-based sustainability initiatives within the private sector.

“There was a great appetite for what we're saying and we are looking forward to continuing to build this network because it is also about peer learning opportunities, about businesses getting together with other businesses who are going about their sustainability journey and helping each other through it,” says Mr. Kopperson of the response to last week's launch. “Businesses big and small are beginning to understand that sustainability practices are good for business because they've learned it helps improve their bottom line, it has an impact on employee retention and recruitment and overall brand and imaging.

“When you practice sustainability in your business, one of the things you should be doing is reducing your greenhouse gas emissions. Just about every business uses fossil fuels in one way or another today and they are expensive. To the extent that you can conserve and reduce your usage through efficiency and conservation then it can save a lot of money. If you're a developer building or owning big buildings or a manufacturer using lots of energy, a two or three per cent reduction in energy use reduces emissions but perhaps more importantly to a given business it reduces their cost which boosts their profitability.”

Profitability, he adds, is a key factor that has resulted in businesses shifting towards looking closer at sustainable practices along with risk mitigation. With the introduction of Ontario's Cap and Trade system, companies now have to report their emissions findings. ClimateWise is focused on helping companies navigate through the process of developing their emission inventories and how to report on them.

“Businesses want to get ahead of the curve,” he says. “They realise they are going to be increasingly regulated and they need to navigate their way through that journey. Then, it is also about branding because, for some, if you are a consumer-oriented company, then your brand means a great deal to you. With the millennial generation coming up, we are finding the young people are much more familiar with the climate file and much more interested in being green and it is becoming part of people's core values. That affects brand image.

“To the extent you, as a company, can demonstrate your commitment to sustainability that means that you are enhancing your brand and, at the same time as you are doing that, you are making it more attractive for people to want to work with you and keep employees as well.”

For more on ClimateWise and how to become involved, visit www.climatewise.ca or follow ClimateWise on Twitter @ClimateWiseBN.