

Carbon neutrality: All it needs is proper execution

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While Al Gore might be considered the “green” man of the year in 2007, the Oxford American Dictionary voted “carbon neutral” as the “word of the year in 2006. Carbon neutral is defined as “making no net release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.”

Carbon dioxide traps heat in the atmosphere and contributes to global warming. It is released through activities such as the burning of gasoline and oil in automobiles, factories and office buildings, and by removing trees and other vegetation from the landscape. Many businesses are now scrambling to put a carbon-neutral label on themselves as a green badge of honor.

While becoming carbon neutral is a worthy goal, there is no accord on how it should be measured, although most agree that it is important to reduce the total impact resulting from a business, including raw-material use, product manufacture, transport and end-of-life management. According to Clean Air Cool Planet, a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing global warming, a company should reduce greenhouse gas emissions resulting from its own activities, but should not be held responsible for its suppliers’ emissions.

Even so, every company can choose its suppliers. While your company might not be directly responsible for greenhouse gas emissions from your paper supplier, for example, you do have a choice about which paper supplier to use. The movement toward carbon neutrality requires that companies and their suppliers work together to reduce carbon emissions.

To become carbon neutral, consider taking the following steps:

- Account for greenhouse gases from company activities: Determine the amount of carbon dioxide released from your company’s direct activities, including energy use, travel and other aspects of your company’s operations.

Product reuse and manufacturing with recycled materials will reduce a company’s energy use. Using fewer materials through source reduction has the most positive impact on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and can save money.

A rough estimate of your company's carbon emissions can be quantified using an online calculator, such as www.climatecare.org/business, www.conservation.org/act or www.ghgprotocol.org/calculations-tools/all-tools. For general guidance on which activities to include in a carbon-neutral assessment, see www.ghgprotocol.org.

- **Reduce energy use:** Following the research stage, it is time for action, and the way to start is by eliminating any unnecessary use of energy uncovered during the accounting stage. This second stage might involve the use of energy-efficient equipment and lighting, teleconferencing to reduce non-essential travel, using low-emission vehicles and turning off electronics when leaving the office.
- **Use clean energy:** For energy still needed for company operations, choose energy sources that generate the fewest carbon emissions, including renewable energy, such as wind water and solar.

Use the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Green Power Locator, located at www.epa.gov, for information and strategies about installing renewable onsite generation activity. If onsite generation isn't an option, increase the amount of renewable power in the electricity grid by purchasing renewable energy credits.

- **Purchase carbon offsets:** For carbon emissions that are impossible to prevent, purchase carbon offsets that equal the amount of emissions your company generates.

Despite the difficulty of achieving carbon neutrality, some companies have made public commitments toward achieving this goal. For example, HSBC Holdings, the world's largest banking group, claims that it has achieved carbon neutrality since 2005 by reducing direct emissions, purchasing green electricity and acquiring carbon offsets.

Dell claims it will be carbon neutral by the end of this year by switching to fluorescent lamps, manufacturing with efficient technologies, purchasing green power and offsetting remaining emissions.

Costa Rica is even striving to be the first carbon-neutral country by preventing illegal logging, overdevelopment and deforestation while securing 80 percent of its electricity from wind and water and compensating landowners that preserve trees.

Achieving carbon neutrality requires significant research, commitment to action and a business culture that values sustainability. Taking responsibility for your company's contribution to global warming is true environmental stewardship.

However, it's an effort that just might reduce your energy costs, provide you branding benefits as a legitimate green company and reduce the risk of regulation.

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