



GREEN WITH ENVY

Sustainable companies set rivals an example.

By Nikki Wright, Wright Communications, Managing Director.

Given how fundamental information technology is in our lives today, it is strange to think when computers first came to prominence many people wrote them off as a fad.

Today, there are vocal critics of the focus on environmental or 'green' issues. Some base their views on scepticism of climate change, or they question New Zealand's ability as a small country to make a difference. Others seem to simply associate sustainability with an outdated image of 'greenies'. I believe naysayers will find themselves swamped by a tide of environmental consciousness and action, just as people who predicted computers would never take off are humorous footnotes in the history of technology.

In comparison to parts of Europe and the US, New Zealand is still an immature 'green' economy, both among consumers and businesses. Best practice environmental sustainability is becoming more common in our corporate sector, yet is certainly not widespread. But the rise in consumer awareness of sustainability marches on, and business should take note. It is one of the pillars of corporate social responsibility which can set a company apart from its competitors.

About a quarter of respondents in last year's New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development's ShapeNZ survey said certified 'eco' labels made them more likely to buy a product. And the respondents most likely to buy 'eco' labels were in households which earned \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year. Demand-driven change is underway, and I believe the importance of companies being able to

demonstrate credible environmental and social responsibility cannot be understated in terms of brand value.

Requests for internationally recognised sustainability reports are increasing as large corporates realise many customers want to buy from companies which are responsible – both environmentally and socially – and can demonstrate that through triple bottom line reports (also known as people, planet and profit reports).

The list of organisations and products which are certified carbon neutral through Landcare Research's carboNZero is nearly at 40. These include electricity giants, major wine producers, a courier company and a major car company. There are another 200 organisations seeking certification.

The Ministry of Economic Development requires all government departments to ask companies tendering for supply contracts to demonstrate their sustainability credentials. Government departments are the biggest purchasers in some product and service markets.

At the core of most companies' operations is information technology. And the way a business deals with its IT equipment and servicing – from purchase to disposal – is an important environmental indicator, particularly as e-waste emerges as a looming problem. A Ministry for the Environment report in 2006 estimated there were about 16 million electronic devices in use in New Zealand, including 10 million computer monitors and television sets which contain hazardous substances.

Chief information officers and IT managers have an important role to play in ensuring best practice policies are not just put in place, but actually implemented. You can start by using their expertise to measure their company's emissions (the first step in a reduction plan).

You can ensure data centres, which can consume enormous amounts of power, are energy-efficient, and move towards virtual infrastructures. You can purchase equipment with Energy Star ratings, and choose an equipment supplier which operates product stewardship, ensuring optimum environmental sustainability. This should include environmentally-friendly design features (such as fewer toxic parts), taking back and recycling old equipment, and minimising packaging.

Workplaces should have credible recycling schemes for resources such as waste paper. As CIOs and IT managers you can support your company putting resources into an office fit-out that reduces power consumption, and therefore has the co-benefit of reducing the company's power bill. And you can ensure facilities for phone and videoconferencing are a serious option to avoid transport emissions.

Paying lip service to environmental sustainability is a recipe for a business being accused of 'green washing', which is a difficult tag to shake off and damaging to a brand.

While debate still goes on about New Zealand's Emissions Trading Scheme, I have no doubt early adopters of a low-carbon approach to doing business will have real long-term advantages over their competitors. Delaying such moves will only see the price go up. ■