Leaflets News and Information for the Arborists of Michigan

Buying Local: Becoming Sustainable

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"Buying local" is a relatively new movement which, I believe, as discussed in last month's article, will out of necessity eventually develop into the standard by which we live. Currently, our culture's manner is to consume, consume and consume more without concern for the environment, our excessive energy consumption and future consequences of our actions. Our current consumer habits reward companies that go to every corner of the globe to find aborigines or natives who will work for slave wages and not question concerns about worker safety, product safety, energy conservation and the environment. So, when things go awry, we are likely to blame corporations for problems such as lead in painted toys and ethylene glycol (antifreeze) in toothpaste.

One of our country's largest employers is Wal-Mart. Because Wal-Mart is large, it has encountered close scrutiny and severe criticism for its hiring/employee treatment practices and its efforts to keep prices low by dictating suppliers' costs of products, many of which are made in China. I don't agree with some of these practices, however, in reality, Wal-Mart is simply a business that is trying to maximize profits and provide customers with products and services in a highly competitive "Global Economy" (Photo 1) as many other corporations and small businesses do. I recall walking into Wal-Mart years ago, almost bumping my head on a large sign that proclaimed how many American jobs were saved in Michigan or Tennessee or wherever, because Wal-Mart chose to purchase products from local industry to support American workers. Subsequently, Wal-Mart quickly learned that shoppers cared less about saving American jobs than they cared about having cheap products. As the cartoon character Pogo proclaimed when expressing concern about pollution in the 1950's, ". . . we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us."

It's the Economy Stupid!

Since the service tax has been rescinded for certain targeted industries like landscape/lawn and fortune tellers, many landscapers and arborists are breathing a sigh of relief. After all, isn't our industry already too cashed-strapped and too highly regulated? Yet it's easy to see why the state is in financial difficulty. Purportedly, 37,000 jobs are leaving Michigan every year. State tax revenues have been declining due to these job losses as well as declining profits by our corporations. Furthermore, several years ago, Michiganders received an income tax reduction, further reducing state revenue. During the conflict between the Governor and the legislators to balance the budget, it was interesting to hear what citizens had to say. Many put the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Governor. One person associated with a landscape business told me that more fat needs to be cut from the government . . ."only don't cut education because I have a couple of kids in grade school, and I believe strongly in a good education." Another person told me that education should be cut because he didn't have any kids; in fact he wondered why anyone who has no kids should have to pay any taxes toward education. Another person told me that the police forces should be beefed up since her car was broken into. Obviously, we all want as many services and benefits as possible, even if we don't want to pay for them.

In Michigan, the supposed auto capital of the world, it should not be difficult to decide which brand of auto to purchase. Even so, the support of our "local" domestic auto industry has been steadily declining and this decline will have significant impact to the service sectors including nursery and landscape. In fact, as unbelievable as it may seem, whether to purchase a foreign or domestic car has become as controversial as gay marriage and breast feeding in public. For other consumables, no one seems to care anymore where their clothes, radio, TV, blender and refrigerator are made; we only cling to this idea of a global economy and purchase of products perceived to be less expensive and/or higher quality. I believe this is irresponsible behavior, and to a large extent, I also believe consumers are largely responsible for our growing trade deficit and our burgeoning national debt on which every man, woman and child in the U.S. now owes $30,000. I cannot fathom how any parent with children would even consider leaving this financial burden and the accompanying less secure future to their children and future generations. With a declining middle class and a movement toward a service economy, how will our industry fare in the coming years?

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"Organic" Landscapes:

Whether we subscribe to the concept of Global Warming and related issues, the world is nevertheless moving in that direction. Is our industry ready to tackle such important issues as minimizing carbon emissions, becoming more responsible stewards of the environment, conserving energy, exhibiting concern for water quality and conservation and reducing pollution? Should we avoid the "bandwagon" or is this in reality a long-term movement that will eventually become our culture? Is there some way that our businesses can capitalize on this movement? Frankly, I'm concerned that the landscape and nursery industries are not prepared for the challenges that confront us is this new "global economy", a phrase I dislike but which is nevertheless occurring before our eyes. Many of us are doing the same thing that we've been doing for the past two or three decades.

Following are some ideas that landscape companies might consider adopting to help promote their more global and environmentally friendly business.

1) Sell Knowledge:

Our industry has gotten itself into a real quandary. We make money primarily by selling a service (mowing, pruning) or applying products (pesticides, fertilizers). Consumers have gotten use to paying only for the application of fertilizers and pesticides, or the installations of irrigation systems, which are often used far too much and may in some instances, create more plant problems. In an analogous way, suppose a medical doctor could only make money by prescribing and selling you drugs for the treatment of Tommy or Suzy. As professionals, we need to sell more knowledge, and we need to convince our clientele that we are worthy of being paid for that knowledge. Certainly, I witness many of the same industry personnel attending seminars every year to gain that knowledge. With all that investment in education and licensing, why shouldn't we be paid for our knowledge? Does your business have a Diagnostic and Advisory Division? On some occasions, the best policy to help manage a particular problem is to do nothing. A strong case can be made that our clients should be paying us not to apply unnecessary pesticides and fertilizers. The challenge is-can we convince them of that notion?

2) Offer Organic:

Many consumers today are becoming more conscious of the toxicity of pesticides and the concern for fertilizers leaching into water ways and groundwater. Is our industry prepared to offer organic approaches to landscape installations and maintenance that might help mitigate these problems? I suspect that many in our industry scoff at the term "organic".

Is our industry ready to tackle such important issues as minimizing carbon emissions, becoming more responsible stewards of the environment, conserving energy, exhibiting concern for water quality and conservation and reducing pollution?

Meanwhile, over the past several years, most of our local common chain grocery stores offer larger and larger selections of fresh produce and processed food that is labeled "organic." And more and more consumers are buying it. And there are many consumers who are willing to pay extra for organic food. These consumers are probably the same clients who usually have sufficient disposable income to contract landscaping and lawn services. In addition, these same folks would more than likely desire an "organic" or "natural" service and might even pay substantially more for that service. In the plant industry, there are ever increasing products such as mychorrizae, natural fertilizers and natural biological controls, which may actually do more than convey perceptions-they may actually benefit our landscapes without some of the side effects of standard products.

3) Advertise "Buy Local"

As the "Buy Local" movement gathers momentum on the coattails of the Global Warming phenomenon, which I can virtually assure you is direction we are headed, we can also cash in on the public's concern for conserving energy, minimizing pollution and utilizing plants that require less care and extraneous inputs. Many of our clients will appreciate the fact that the plants were propagated locally rather than have been shipped half way across the country. Furthermore, we haven't even begun to properly consider and preach the extensive variety of advantages native plants have to offer. Our industry can capitalize on the perception that going "native" is highly beneficial to our environment.

4) Advertise "Low Carbon Impact"

With concern for global warming, there is a corresponding concern for carbon emissions, believed to be the primary cause of global warming. Are your trucks capable of running on E85 (ethanol)? Are you running bio diesel? Have you purchased small fuel efficient cars to perform runabout services

Photo 1. The owners of this property in West Bloomfield, Michigan must be dejected over the destruction of their ash trees by the Emerald Ash Borer, a consequence of the global trade. While we may save some money by purchasing products made in China or elsewhere, we will have to expend considerable funds fixing problems created by what I consider to be an irresponsible Global Economy.

Photo 2. Can this landscape benefit and be managed by implementation of organic and or sustainable landscaping? You bet!

and errands rather than use that large gas guzzling truck or SUV? Again, your business acumen can go a long way to help foster very positive perceptions about your business, which can also affect your bottom line. Our clients will feel grateful and will be more inclined to patronize those companies that express a concern for carbon emissions and other pollutants and that make realistic efforts to reduce them. Advertise, for example, if you have spent extra on new more fuel efficient and less polluting equipment. An added benefit for which consumers will also be thankful is the reduced reliance on foreign oil while we maintain their landscapes.

5) Create a Newsletter

How does one adopt various practices that can truly make a difference in not only positively impacting the likelihood of global warming but which will also increase the public perception that we are making positive changes? Advertising is one method. I know of a few companies that print newsletters; these newsletters disclose the company's business plans and of issues they plan to address in the coming year. What a great way to build a relationship with our clients. We can go even further and relate the need to alter our practices and how our company plans to become more contemporary with today's climate and environmental needs.

While there still is skepticism about global warming and various concerns about the environment, there's an undeniable fact that the public is growing more concerned about these issues as well as conserving energy and becoming less dependent on foreign oil. The present track of excess spending, the huge trade deficit, the growing national debt and the continued consumption of much of the world's oil reserve is not sustainable; most likely, foreign interests will stop buying U.S. debt as we become more risky, and oil reserves will become far more expensive and eventually be exhausted. I predict that out of necessity consumer habits will be aimed at buying local and developing a more sustainable culture. As one presidential contender recently said, even if we are wrong about global warming, the only harm we've done is leave our children a better environment and a more secure future.

Boulder City

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