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Greening up the office

To save money in a tough economy, businesses are hoping sustainability is the key

Birmingham Business Journal - by [Lauren B. Cooper](#) Staff

Talk of “going green” is running rampant these days.

With rising energy costs and dwindling bottom lines, more businesses are jumping on the sustainable bandwagon and implementing cost-saving and environmentally friendly measures to ensure a brighter and more prosperous future for their companies.

And Birmingham businesses are finding going green is easier than they expected, with more options for recycling and e-cycling in the city and numerous sustainable measures that all employees can get on board with.

Property management firm Cousins Properties, which manages Inverness Center off U.S. 280, uses a super-hero mascot, Captain Save-A-Watt, to promote energy efficiency in the office park and offers its tenants incentives to pick up the green initiative.

Judy Anchors, a property manager at Cousins, said about 90 percent of property managers in Birmingham have developed some sort of green initiative for tenants because of the cost saving benefits.

“People are learning about other vendors that are out there – office supplies, plastics, trash,” she said. “Anything with a green seal or is certified is savings to the tenant and the environment and tenants want to see that.”

Cousins, a national company, started its local green initiatives in 2005, ahead of many companies in the area, but behind others in the nation, Anchors said. In addition to the mascot and incentive program, it also offers recycling and e-cycling programs, among others in the community.

And with those efforts, savings have been passed along to tenants and has become a valuable marketing tool for the office park, she said.

But sometimes, there may be an aspect of going green that doesn't fit with a particular office.

Resistance was met when Hallmark Builders Inc.'s new office switched from paper plates and cups to glass as part of their green office initiative, said Sallie Hallmark, marketing manager for the general contractor.

But employees of the company have thrown their full support behind Hallmark's other sustainable efforts, she said.

Old newspapers are donated to the human society or dropped off at the recycling bins at Whole Foods and employees are asked to conserve energy by turning off lights in unused rooms in the building, among other things.

Hallmark recently built its own office in Birmingham using energy efficient concepts and materials, which also have helped cut costs, she said.

Larger, tinted windows and overhangs allow employees to cut down on over-head light use and the company has been able to regulate the temperature better throughout the building using multiple HVAC units, she said.



BBJ file photo

To help companies 'go green,' Brantley Fry of the Green Resource Center for Alabama visits workplaces to share tips on how to become more environmentally friendly.

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“The windows helped,” she said. “We worked at the Colonnade and it was a big change to regulate our own costs. We are definitely saving on energy as far as air conditioning and lights go.”

But for those in the business community not sure where to start their green initiatives, the Green Resource Center for Alabama offers some simple ideas and tips on ways to conserve energy and improve the bottom line.

With current economic conditions, most companies are looking for ways to go green without adding undue burden to employees, said Brantley Fry, the center’s interim executive director.

“Some people want to do as much as they can and others want to do the bare minimum,” she said. “Make sure it’s not a burden, (because) then the initiative and willingness is lost.”

Fry said she’s amazed by the number of businesses becoming more aware of green initiatives as a cost-cutting measure.

“Some companies have been doing it for a long time,” she said. “It’s become so mainstream now that people want to be a part of it. There are different levels, but there has definitely been a rise in awareness.”

The following are some cost-saving tips for offices from the Green Resource Center:

- Use scrap office paper to print drafts and internal documents.
- Change defaults on printers to print on both sides of a page.
- Change default on computer to decrease margins, maximizing the use of a sheet of paper.
- Think about buying paper with recycled content.
- Turn off the computer when it’s not in use or set the stand-by or sleep mode to turn it off sooner.
- Find a recycling program for office paper, such as the one offered by the Alabama Environmental Council, and e-cycling program for older office electronics, such as the one offered by Technical Knockout in Birmingham.
- Turn off lights when not in a room.
- Offer recycling bins for cans from the vending machine.
- When applicable, use glass mugs and plates rather than paper. However, some companies are starting to offer bio-based, biodegradable paper plates and cups, said Fry.
- Talk with the office’s property manager about services they or their custodial vendors offer.

lbcooper@bizjournals.com | (205) 443-5635

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