

Moving Sustainability from Ideas to Action

Just two years into its commitment to sustainability, Southern Miss is creating culture change.

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As Bob Dylan once wrote..."the times they are a-changin'." Never before in the history of mankind has that simple phrase been so true, as now.

The rising tide of social, environmental and economic challenge is creating an undeniable impact on every aspect of society fueled by climate change, corporate greed, economic meltdown, issues of over-consumption and a plethora of social and environmentally induced health issues.

We are swimming in the waters of uncertainty and the powerful currents of change. Traditional ways of thinking, acting and doing are simply not sufficient to grapple with the challenges we are facing as a global society. What is needed is a new paradigm that rejects segmented thinking in favor of a more systemic perspective, offering hope for creating innovative solutions to sustain our quality of life, while ensuring our children and future generations inherit a viable world.

A variety of factors including societal shifts, an increasingly compelling business case for sustainability and the growing chorus of people calling for change, has moved sustainability from the fringe to forefront of discussions. It has become a major topic of conversation in boardrooms and

executive suites in organizations of every shape and size. In every corner of the globe leaders seem to be wrestling with what sustainability means to their organization, its viability and how to effectively engage people in "walking the talk."

A comment from an executive in a recent conversation we had about sustainability offers a snapshot of the current situation, "if you and I had talked about this subject a couple of years ago, I would have politely listened, but really would not have thought much about the conversation after you walked out the door. Today, I am still not sure exactly what sustainability means to our organization, but I know I need to find out." This short segment of conversation is symbolic of the increasing interest in sustainability, but also reflects the need for guidance about what sustainability means and how to bring these values into institutional cultures.

Institutions of Higher Education have a unique opportunity to fill this need through research and influence and perhaps most importantly by becoming living laboratories that can help us learn how to develop sustainability-focused cultures. The University of Southern Mississippi is one of the 600 institutions of higher education that



have embraced this challenge through their commitment to the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment.

The Southern Miss Story

In March, 2007 Martha Dunagin Saunders became the ninth President of the University of Southern Mississippi. When she took the reins, she had a lot of ideas, but unlike many leaders, she decided to listen before she spoke. Between September and December 2007 the President engaged our team of consultants to help her understand the strengths, hopes and dreams of her campus community. The Core Dialogue design engaged a cross-section of stakeholders, including faculty, staff, leadership, alumni, business people and community members. The data gathered from these sessions produced five areas of strategic focus. The areas were then used by President Saunders to frame the development of the Southern Miss Strategic plan. The focus on creating a culture of healthy minds and body emerged from the process. A sub theme of this area was a desire for the campus to "go green."

Leadership Commitment

In April of 2008, President Saunders took the first steps to lead her campus toward fulfilling the strategic goal of "going green." She signed American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment publicly proclaiming the University's goal to become climate neutral. This was not the first time she had signed on to Commitment. As Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, she had been a charter signatory.

Reaching beyond simply "going green," in July

2008, she created and funded the Office of Sustainability and named Larry Lee as the full-time Sustainability Officer. The office and initiative budgets were funded by the projected savings from energy and recycling programs, which Lee proposed as the first initiatives. The President reinforced her level commitment to this sustainability initiative during her Presidential Inaugural Speech in May, 2008 and again in the 2008 Fall Convocation. On both occasions her message spoke to the true potential of sustainability by communicating that this was not just the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do from an economic perspective. By the summer of 2008 the goal of becoming a sustainable university community had been communicated. What that really meant and how to achieve this vision was not.

Find a few Friends. Light a few fires.

With the direction set and her commitment clear, President Saunders gave authority to people on the ground to make it happen. In Lee, President Saunders found a man on a mission. If you ask him what he does, his answer is simple, "My job is to help President Saunders ensure this campus is viable 40 years from now." He shares with a smile, "It is sometimes a bit of a challenge to be a tree hugger in a red state." He clearly understands and embraces the challenge. "There are not a lot of people who don't completely understand what we are saying when we talk about sustainability, but we have a strong base of students and faculty who have joined the cause," says Lee. Fertile soil to plant the seeds of change. Lee, together with his small mission-driven team welcome the challenge, choosing to meet the community where they by speaking language people understand


and providing many opportunities for people to get involved.

The Office of Sustainability is staffed by Lee, Haley McMinn, a full-time graduate assistant working on her Ph.D in Higher Education Administration at Southern Miss., and Shawn Litton, the Recycling Program Manager. This core team depends upon student, staff and faculty volunteers to provide the necessary man power and advocacy for the programs.

Create a plan and execute

Southern Miss Head football coach, Larry Fedora uses the mantra Attack. Attack. Attack to fire up his players. This same call to action is how the sustainability team got off the ground. Before the Office of Sustainability even had a sign on its door, Lee and McMinn sat in a room together and quickly filled the white board that stretched the expanse of the wall in front of them, with all they wanted to accomplish. From that session the vision and mission of the Office of Sustainability was born and what would become known as the Southern Miss Green Initiative and the EcoEagle Sustainability program took shape.

Heeding advice from sustainability experts and the best of what the team gleaned from their research, an action plan was in place and implemented by the beginning of the 2008–09 academic year, just two months after the Office of Sustainability officially opened. Two principles guide the Southern Miss Green Initiative: KISS (keep it simple stupid) and GBOSH (Go big or stay home). GBOSH defines the aggressive, can do attitude, entrepreneurial personality of this initiative.



As with any change initiative, perhaps the most important factor of success is the ability to hold on the vision and mission and keep the tension between where you are and where you are going.

The Vision Statement: The University of Southern Mississippi will strive to become a model of sustainable thought and practice within our state and region. Through development of ideas and programs, we will encourage healthy dialogue, forward thinking, and behaviors that instill a collective awareness and concern of how our impact affects future generations.

The Mission Statement: Our operations will function, at all times, in mindful accordance with the tenets of sustainability and we will leverage our strength as a research institution to encourage thought leadership, knowledge communities, and innovation within the realm of sustainability.

University Climate Commitment Council: The University Climate Commitment Council (UC3) is a 17-member group comprised of faculty, staff, and students on the University of Southern Mississippi campus. The mission of this council is to oversee all campus efforts regarding sustainability and to ensure that the university is consistently in compliance with the ACUPCC.



Connecting Branding, Identity Dynamics and Culture Change

One of the first steps in engaging the campus was to name and visually brand the initiative. The Southern Miss Green Initiative became the official name, while EcoEagle was adopted as the programming and educational portion of the initiative. The team along with the University's Office of Communications did a good job leveraging the connections to Southern Miss (Golden Eagle the school mascot) while creating a strong and recognizable visual brand for the office and its programs. Beyond the visual brand the initiative employed messaging that built on emotion and logic to begin to tell their story.

Messages communicated through a well-designed and strategic branding program provide emotional and intellectual connection to the initiative and to the associated values. Understanding and tapping into the natural connections between identity (who am I), image (what other say about me) and behavior (what I do) can facilitate the success of sustainability initiatives and support the ultimate goal of culture change. By culture change I mean changing the beliefs, attitudes and values to the point that sustainable behavior becomes part of the taken-for-granted assumptions about "how we do things around here."

Branding programs define differentiation and create perceptions designed to create identification and connection. This ultimate goal of any branding process is to influence behavior and behavior is directly tied to values which in turn is connected to identity. For example, Volvo=safety (the perception). My family's safety is important

to me (values), therefore I drive a Volvo (behavior). This behavior is a reflection of who I am and what I believe (my identity). This identity is reinforced when other people refer to be as a "good parent" because I am concerned about the safety of my family (image)...this reinforcing loop strengthens my commitment to Volvo to the point that Volvo is me and I am Volvo. This same cycle can be leveraged to create connection to sustainability. Over time as more and more people "get it," the values of sustainability and associated behaviors become a part of the cultural core of the organization.

The first step in any successful branding process is to create awareness and to awaken people to the issues at hand. If I don't believe safety is an important issue, the identity of Volvo as a safe vehicle is irrelevant to me. If people don't understand why they should care, they won't. And, so it is with sustainability initiatives.

(Insert Green Initiative Logo Here)

From the beginning the Southern Miss Green Initiative focused on engaging and educating the campus, getting people involved and creating opportunities for small wins and celebration. Below is a list of programs that were implemented in the first year. Each of these programs is clearly explained on the Green Initiative website www.usm.edu/green.

(insert Eco Eagle Logo Here)

EcoEagle Programs

- Film Series
- Lectures Series
- Bike Program
- Recycling program

- Eco Eagle Representatives
- Farmers Market
- News (our new newsletter)
- RecycleMania
- Recycling Services

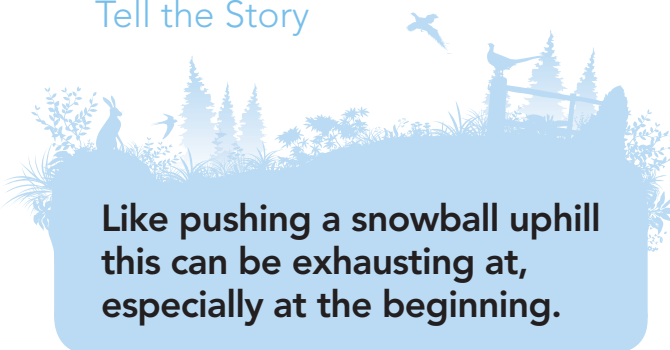
Goals

- Expanded Earth Week Celebration
- Completion of GHG Emissions Inventory
- Beginning of Carbon Neutrality Plan
- Improvements to the Website
- Curriculum Development
- Energy conservation / mitigation / management

successes and challenges. This external attention has served to reinforce the growing identity and image of Southern Miss as a sustainability-focused campus. As discussed previously image is an important factor in providing the feedback necessary for gradually changing then Southern Miss culture.

The Green Initiative website www.usm.edu/green is the official storytelling site for the Office of Sustainability. It is clearly branded, simple, clear and populated with relevant information. The site is a portal to information, but it is also serves as a megaphone, calling the Southern Miss community to step up, take responsibility and get involved.

Tell the Story



Don't be afraid to tell your story. Be clear and authentic about what you are doing. This advice has guided the Southern Miss communication efforts. Part of building awareness about and connection to the Southern Miss Green Initiative is consistently sharing what is happening. Over the past year articles about the Southern Miss efforts have appeared in USA Today, both Hattiesburg and Jackson Mississippi Press and various on-line mediums. No doubt this is a work in progress, but the Southern Miss Office of Sustainability is happy to talk to anyone and everyone about their

The Journey continues

As the Southern Miss Green Initiative enters its second year they are very proud of the many prongs of the program and the inroads they have made. The plan is to continue the crusade, continue doing what they are doing to engage the hearts of the Southern Miss community through the various EcoEagle programs. In this next year the office will continue to work from both the emotional and educational angles but will also focus on the operational aspects of the initiative. Working to institutionalize sustainability into the operations and policies of the community will clearly define expectations and behaviors.

This will be accomplished over this next year through the creation of the Southern Miss Climate Action Plan (CAP) which is a plan for becoming climate neutral and incorporating sustainability in to the University's curriculum. The plan is due May 15, 2010. The Office also plans to adopt the ASSHE STARS Assessment program as the metrics



that will define and measure success of the initiative.

Success will ultimately be defined by the degree to which we are able reach beyond cognition to really getting people to care— to move from doing green to being green and from being green to embracing sustainability as a deeply held set of values. As with any change initiative, perhaps the most important factor of success is the ability to hold on the vision and mission and keep the tension between where you are and where you are going. In the early stages of any change process, people must be moved to indifference to understanding. This incremental change is accomplished by constantly educating, prodding and inspiring, but never giving up. Leveraging branding and knowledge of identity dynamics can be valuable in developing and designing an initiative.

Like pushing a snowball uphill this can be exhausting, especially at the beginning. The team at Southern Miss will tell you they are making progress, people are joining in, but at times it is frustrating. And, while there is evidence of growing interest and intent on the part of the campus community “to do the right thing,” creating identification with sustainability is a work in progress. The goal at Southern Miss is to change the way people see themselves. This will ultimately shift the belief systems and associated behaviors and attitudes to a tipping point where sustainability becomes a way of life. This takes time, focus and passion. It is not a mission is not for the faint of heart or for those will tepid intent for creating real change.

Over and over through our research and experiences we have seen that an organization’s serious commitment to creating synergistic relationship between economic prosperity, environmental stewardship and social justice can result in tremendous upside in terms of tangible returns. Realized benefits can include: enhanced reputation, more powerful brand, increased goodwill, increased employee engagement, a competitive edge in the “war for talent, a more energized and vision-driven workforce and increased efficiencies. All of which translate to real bottom-line benefits. Simply stated people like to be connected to things bigger than themselves. Sustainability offers that opportunity. As President Saunders proclaimed in her Inaugural Address, this is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do on many fronts. As living laboratories of research and learning Institutions of Higher Education have a unique and powerful opportunity to lead the way in showing us how to create cultures that produce organizational communities that fully embrace the values of sustainability. Who better to take on this challenge.

About the Author:

Mona A. Amodeo, Ph.D works at the intersection of research and practice to engage organizations in building extraordinary brands built on cultures of engagement and execution. As founder and president of **idgroup**, she puts to use her research-based understanding of the relationship between culture change, branding, and sustainability to help clients flourish. Mona’s in-depth research and analysis of the Interface Inc. sustainability journey provides companies a unique and proven framework for creating real and lasting culture change.

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