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OPINION

Collaborative sustainability

(Jul. 20) By Casey Chroust

Right now retailers are at varying places along the sustainability maturity curve. Some are just starting up a sustainability program and trying to identify where to begin, while others are at the far end of that curve and have a robust and comprehensive sustainability program in place. Whether a new actor, seasoned player, or somewhere in between, the key ingredient for success today is collaboration.

Executives need to facilitate this collaborative mindset inside and outside of their companies and bring ideas to the table that drive innovative initiatives throughout their operations. At RILA, we remain dedicated to helping executives accomplish these goals through both our Retail Sustainability Initiative (RSI) as well as RILA's annual Environmental Sustainability & Compliance Conference (ESCC).

Taking place Sept. 22 to 24, 2010 in San Diego, California, ESCC will again feature major retailers and industry leaders with firsthand experience with integrating environmentally sustainable practices into their respective companies. As attendees at ESCC explore the different avenues and advances in sustainability, collaboration and its many applications is sure to be a recurring theme.

Collaboration has become such a central concept because retailers recognize the opportunities for improvement throughout every facet of their operation and the numerous partners and stakeholders involved in instituting sustainable business practices.

Externally, retailers need to continue to work upstream with suppliers and manufacturers on product design and packaging. There are also opportunities to partner with distribution centers and service and transportation providers. Retailers need to interface with customers and take into account their expectations and ideas around sustainability. And, finally, it is vital to start the conversation with non-government organizations and government agencies, to seize on programs and resources available to retailers and also to communicate thoughts and ideas.

Internally, a large part of the equation is collaboration between departments to drive change in each sector and execute sustainable practices across the organization. Retailers need to measure and track success and integrate those findings back into a holistic plan. They also need to engage employees and give them an incentive to be part of the process.

ESCC will address these trends and the key operational aspects of environmental sustainability and compliance for the retail industry, including sessions on energy management, waste management, water conservation, product development, supply chain management, communications, and corporate social responsibility -- all in a holistic manner.

Kicking off this year's conference will be Casey Sheahan, CEO of Patagonia. One of the pioneers in sustainable retailing, Patagonia is widely known for its commitment to product quality and environmental responsibility. Sheahan will share with attendees the story of Patagonia's journey to success, and its mission to use business to inspire and implement solutions to environmental challenges, which rests at the heart of the company's business model.

Other notable speakers include Linda Povey, VP strategic consulting for the Natural Marketing Institute. Povey will cover consumer trends in sustainability, focusing on the transformation of sustainability from a "niche" concept for marketers and retailers to a rapidly growing mainstream model.

Some of the most exciting advances in the sustainability of consumer products lie in the Sustainability Consortium. Launched in 2009, the consortium is an independent organization of diverse global participants working collaboratively to build a scientific, lifecycle-based foundation to drive product innovation. Representatives from retail companies that are members of the Sustainability Consortium, as well as leading consortium academics, will participate in a panel discussion. This session will focus on the goals and mission of the Sustainability Consortium and its success to-date in developing transparent methodologies, tools and strategies to drive a new generation of products and supply networks that address environmental, social and economic imperatives.

Attendees at a general session on retail enforcement and compliance trends will learn the latest on environmental regulatory issues affecting retail. From the Environmental Protection Agency to the Department of Transportation to the State of California, attendees will receive an up-to-the-minute report on regulatory priorities for the months and years ahead. This session will be led by former Assistant Deputy Administrator of the EPA, Grant Nakayama and Joe Eisert, who are now partners at the Washington office of Kirkland & Ellis LLP and are experts on environmental counseling and litigation.

Also joining the list of distinguished speakers is actor and environmental activist Ed Begley Jr., who has been regarded as an environmental leader in the Hollywood community for many years. Known for turning up at Hollywood events on his bicycle, Begley sits on the board of countless environmental groups and hosts his own TV show, espousing a true belief in the power of green living. Begley will address attendees about his activism and devotion to environmental sustainability.

Looking to the future, sustainability is teed up to unfold much like "e-business adoption." The dot-com boom gave us e-commerce, e-mail, e-business, e-everything. It started as an "electronic" trend, and now everything in business is done electronically. While sustainability has become the latest trend, for retailers it is a space where they have been aggressively active, and in time, sustainability is going to be imbedded in all business processes for retailers.

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