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U.S. Green Building Council Helps Companies Reach for Zero Waste

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Arlene Karidis | Dec 07, 2017

Diversion has long been a priority at Etsy, from the days when employees biked their compost to a farm near the company's Brooklyn, N.Y., headquarters and tracked most its waste using a software created in-house. But Etsy's sustainability efforts have expanded over the years, most recently

with support of a green business certification program administered by U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC).

More than 130 companies or facilities have signed on for the certification program called TRUE Zero Waste.

It was designed to provide a roadmap to achieve high diversion levels; help create a zero waste, closed loop economy; and increase bottom lines. Participants learn best practices in redesigning waste systems, from upstream management, to zero waste purchasing, to training employees. And they learn how to document diversion and develop metrics.

“We started the certification [program] primarily to give a standard definition for zero waste, using Zero Waste International Alliance’s definition where virtually all discarded materials are diverted, and become resources for reuse,” says Stephanie Barger, director, market transformation & development, TRUE Zero Waste Certification.

Participants earn credits through practices like redesigning packaging to reduce waste, donating food, or buying 100 percent recycled products. They must engage in those practices and be at a specified diversion rate for the particular certification level they pursue for 12 months to receive certification.

Most companies are saving money through the changes put in place. Some have seen returns of up to \$100,000 to \$1 million through waste sustainability projects in six months to a year, according to Barger.

Sierra Nevada Brewing Co. in Mills River, N.C., saves on average at least \$300,000 a year from waste reduction and source separation of recyclables sold as commodities.

The company was already focused on sustainability, but the program motivated more change, for instance to look closer at purchasing decisions, says Cheri Chastain, sustainability manager, Sierra Nevada Brewing.

Especially helpful were on-site visits from the program's assessors and the report Sierra received afterward.

"Having a third-party come in provided a little more clout because there were people out there really paying attention to this work. We had always done a lot of what we ended up getting certified for, but hadn't really documented it well, as we now do," says Chastain.

Participants engage in online workshops, go to conferences and network through USGBC chapters, which bring in speakers. Participants can earn points in different categories. The number of points earned indicates the project's certification level.

"When we created the categories, we looked at both upstream and downstream considerations, with upstream being to not create or buy it in the first place; and downstream being diverting from landfill," says Sue Beets-Atkinson, who is chair on the USGBC Zero Waste Advisory Council and helped create the TRUE certification program.

The certification process pushed Etsy to think beyond outgoing materials and to focus efforts on incoming materials through integration with procurement, says Hilary Young, sustainability manager at Etsy.

"It provided guidance to integrate zero waste principles throughout our operations so we achieve meaningful reduction alongside diversion," Young says.

Among exercises the company adopted through the process are quantification of reuse and consistent tracking of cost savings. The certification also helped reveal gaps in the procurement process that Etsy has worked to improve to achieve greater reductions. In 2016, the company diverted, on average, 84 percent of its waste from landfill or incineration across global operations, up from 76 percent the year before.

Program participants begin at varying levels in their journey toward greater sustainability, from early on to well on their way to zero waste. And they work collectively during networking opportunities.

“They are here to learn together, not compete,” says Barger. “They all benefit if they can find ways to increase market for OCC (old corrugated containers.) Or find a solution for hard-to-recycle plastic. Or work together to build compost infrastructure.”

Company officials learn to consider the entire lifecycle of products used in their operations, and ultimately work to support a bigger picture beyond their own companies’ reduction and diversion practices.

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