

Sustainable Success Reports

from the St. Louis Green Business Challenge



Office Essentials Profits As A "Green" Supplier

By Jean Ponzi

Office Essentials distributes office supplies and business furniture to companies headquartered in the Midwest region. Most of the firm's 100 employees work from St. Louis, with a smaller office in Kansas City. Clients are primarily based in Missouri, southern Illinois and Kansas, with nation-wide deliveries serving corporate accounts with facilities around the U.S.

"We're a young company that's rich in experience," says Kate Dougherty, Vice President of Sales and Marketing. "OE was founded in 2001, and nearly 90% of our staff matriculated from other office supply firms, from local independents and the big-box nationals. So we've adapted best practices from across our industry."

That experience - and OE's customer base and revenues - expanded when OE entered the St. Louis Green Business Challenge in 2012, and engaged in the Challenge process of "Greening" the kinds of day-to-day practices common to every kind of business, including purchasing and supply chain policies and practices.

"The Challenge has been a huge catalyst of innovative thought within OE," reports Dougherty. "We were supplying recycled-content products to some customers, but we hadn't considered developing an entire Green program. The Challenge gave the nudge we needed to leverage our Green-product savvy as a real business advantage."

"As we evaluated our own operations through the sustainability lens, the natural next step was a deep look into the entire procurement cycle: Search, Find, Buy, Receiving, Payment, Delivery and Use. We identified all the points where OE could help our customers reduce impacts essential to business success: Costs, Time and Carbon."

The result was Smart Choice, a unique service that helps customers cost-effectively choose products to meet both working needs and sustainability expectations. "We saw the opportunity to serve as a Green consultant around office supplies," Dougherty says, "showing our customers where their purchases could have the best impacts."

The business-Greening process has also given OE an edge within their supply chain, where a glossary of terms like % recycled content, locally sourced, rapidly renewable and many more can add confusion to the demands of marketing vast product lines.

"Our industry includes tens of thousands of products," says Dougherty, "in at least ten categories, from paper supplies to tech products to cleaning and break room supplies - and more. We realized that our vendors were often as challenged as our customers to decode Green product claims."

"As the OE staff continually grows our expertise in this area, we are able to help our vendors understand and better promote the value of product certifications, avoid 'Greenwashing,' and more competitively market the sustainable features of their product lines."

"We'll continue in the Green Business Challenge in 2015," Dougherty states. "There's more we can learn, and more efficiencies we can apply in our buildings and operations."

"The evidence is clear that sustainability is a business advantage for Office Essentials. Our efforts are translating into customer satisfaction, from longtime and new clients who are small firms to national corporations. We're helping to boost the 'Green cred' within our industry. We're seeing positive results by evaluating success across the 'triple bottom line' of people, planet and profit."

The St. Louis Green Business Challenge, a joint program of the St. Louis Regional Chamber and the Missouri Botanical Garden, delivers Triple Bottom Line results (financial, social and environmental) to companies across the region. The Challenge employs a scorecard of strategies and customized coaching to help businesses of every size and type "Green up" everyday practices, and be recognized for innovative measures. This column is funded in part by the St. Louis-Jefferson Solid Waste Management District and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

Learn more at www.stlouisgreenchallenge.com

