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10 Ways SMEs Can Improve Competitiveness



by Emily Drew

[Big Sky, Montana](#), is nestled in the west of the state, in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, on the edge of Yellowstone National Park—an ideal place to discuss how businesses can alleviate stress on our shared natural environment and its resources.

On Saturday in Big Sky, at the start of the most recent [APEC meetings](#), I moderated a panel with two inspirational small-business owners: Tom Bowman of [Bowman Design Group](#) (10 employees, based in California) and Spencer Williams of [West Paw Design](#) (45 employees, based in Montana). Both business presidents are leaders in showing how—in practice and theory—sustainable business practices can be opportunities for small-sized and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to generate new sources of business value.

Often, discussions of SMEs and sustainability focus on disincentives for these businesses; such discussions assert that any actions for the environment will result in some loss of revenue, which can mean death for many SMEs.

Bowman Design Group and West Paw Design, however, have proven that SMEs may be the best place for sustainability to enter an industry or supply chain. “By nature,” said Bowman, “small business are a rich target of opportunity for sustainability work and implementation. Small businesses are scrappy, personal, agile, and adaptable.”

By the end of our discussion, the panelists had identified ten ways SMEs can improve their competitiveness through sustainable business practices. These ten actions are things that Bowman and Williams have done in their own organizations to drive profit, save money, retain employees, draw new customers, and thrive in a global marketplace.

1. Set huge, seemingly unattainable goals (measureable, if possible).
2. Examine your value chain to seek sustainability-related, revenue-generating opportunities at every step.
3. Speak about your values and find people who share your values.
4. Find and tell the story of differentiated value in your products.
5. Look to your employees for ideas.
6. Change conventions in transportation, shipping, and packaging.
7. When you run into problems, zoom out and look at the bigger picture (farther and farther) until you see the solution.
8. Look at your carbon foot-print metrics as a place to start in sustainability work.
9. Build a brand of trust and respect, possibly through certifications and third-party verifiers.
10. Admit what you haven't yet been able to achieve.

<http://bcl.chamberpost.com/2011/05/10-ways-smes-can-improve-competitiveness.html#more-5380>