



# The Value of Sustainability Communications Strategies in Achieving Facilities Goals

By David Bookhart and Ed Kirk

When sustainability efforts were gaining ground on college campuses, many thought sustainability was simply the traditional environmental movement with a new name. Clearly there are similarities; both are embedded in a strong foundation of environmental stewardship, and both have the zeal and enthusiasm of the youth as they look toward making the world a better place.

However, while the environmental movement was largely ecology based – looking at ecosystems and natural environments – the sustainability movement is management and efficiency based. While the environmental movement focused on reducing impacts through conservation and sacrifice, the sustainability movement focuses on maintaining healthy and productive work environments by reducing waste, not comfort. Most importantly the environmental movement focused on, well, the environment.

The sustainability movement, on the other hand, places the environment within the context of economic efficiency, health and productivity of building occupants, and pragmatic utilization of utilities and natural resources.

Because of the immediate connection with buildings, operations, and finance, sustainability programs often have strong relationships with campus facilities groups. There is a natural synergy between facilities and sustainability because of the shared goals of reducing or eliminating the waste of energy, water, resources, funding, and of the profes-

sional staff's time. From both sustainability and facilities viewpoints, waste leads to overconsumption of resources, environmental damage, occupant discomfort, and excessive costs.

With this obvious area of commonality, how best to utilize sustainability to meet facilities goals? One clear avenue stands out; taking advantage of sustainability communications strategies to achieve operational successes.

Facilities management has typically been an invisible art form, behind the scenes. Operations staffs are not accustomed to reaching out to building occupants, while sustainability staffs are trained to do exactly that. Sustainability is rooted in the concept that all members of the community have a role to play in “greening” the institution, and so the best way to get occupants involved is to engage them directly. Sustainability staff meet with building occupants and start conversations about the ways buildings work. They develop surveys and share the results and spotlight successes. They ask for opinions and provide answers and make the invisible, visible.

From a facilities point of view, there is a distinct advantage to leveraging the sustainability approach. An aggressive engagement program allows observations and new ideas to travel a two-way street back to the facilities offices. When done right, sustainability staff are able to engage building occupants in ways that provide constructive feedback.

At Johns Hopkins University all members of the sustainability staff work

in concert with the plant operations staff to find ways of increasing building comfort while saving energy (and funding and environmental impacts) following the mantra that health, comfort, and safety must be maintained. Testing new technologies or efficiency cannot compromise this mantra since it is vitally important for people not to feel like they are sacrificing for sustainability.

To pass on this message, the office employs a behavioral specialist who spends a significant amount of time in buildings meeting with the occupants. She has well-developed presentations for administrative groups, conducts monthly meetings with green “champions,” and organizes trainings with building operational staff to ensure that efficiency goals are being met. The office also has a data analyst who concentrates on metrics so that building occupants can see how their actions affect monthly consumption totals.

Combining the monthly energy, water, and recycling metrics with behavior change efforts helps bring to life the idea that buildings and campuses are dynamic and ever-changing. Finally, as a university dedicated to research and teaching, the office takes advantage of the enthusiasm and energy of students to help shed light on tricky facilities problems. An outreach coordinator, focusing on student actions and coordinating work teams, can provide clear and tangible benefits to facilities efforts.

At Johns Hopkins, sustainability staff were able to produce results, such as:

- **Scheduling** – with a combination of surveys and individual questionnaires, the behavioral specialist was able to determine a more accurate building schedule that helped cut an average of three hours per day off of “occupied” temperature controls.
- **Messaging** – by focusing on established marketing strategies, the outreach coordinator was able to increase recycling and composting yields by devising effective messaging.
- **Changing behaviors** – by providing the visibility on building utility consumption, the data analyst has shown building occupants how their individual actions affect the university’s sustainability (and utility reduction) goals.
- **Legwork and research** – Sustainability coordinators worked with volunteers and students to survey overlooked items such as elevator lights, location and placement of recycling bins, and flow rates of restroom fixtures.

The expanded engagement with building occupants provides comprehensive feedback to the facilities managers regarding how individual buildings operate. Building occupants tend to give information to the people they know and see regularly – the sustainability engagement staff. Where occupants would have complained in the past, now they give this information to the sustainability staff.

In new construction and retrofit projects, the emphasis on sustainability helps focus on the long-term needs of building occupants, minimizing operations and maintenance, and reducing waste. The office reaches out directly to design consultants and commissioning agents to ensure energy efficient initiatives are clearly defined, robustly designed and are more maintainable for operations staff. A sustainable approach to building systems is one that achieves the desired comfort levels, and health and safety re-

quirements, and is less costly and simpler to operate. We review design concepts earlier in the process and communicate more thoughtfully and proactively with the wide range of stakeholders.

We have learned that this process may take more time within institutional environments where consensus is desired, but evidence suggests that resource efficient buildings are not more costly to design, build, or operate and are a great investment in the future of our campus. ☺

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