Stern Produce Sustainability Assessment and Performance Reporting

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The Sustainability Coordinator of Stern Produce has recognized and acknowledged that the company is capable of improving its efficiency and impact on the environment and society. However, this would require the guidance and urgency of integrating a sustainability vision and mission into Stern Produce’s decision-making and operations. To evaluate whether employing sustainability objectives makes a difference, tracking and measuring of strategies and information is necessary. Therefore, key performance sustainability indicators (KPIs) are integral to gauge the sustainability performance and value to the Stern Produce and stakeholders and thus, the purpose of this project.

Due to the family-owned business nature of the company, formalized practices and procedures were not the norm, aside from the safety certifications. Under recent changes in management, Stern Produce had been gradually adopting formal practices to improve efficiency. Thus, the Sustainability Coordinator has been assisting in filling in the gaps and facilitating the institutionalizing of certain process i.e. increasing transparency and gathering sustainability data. However, existing relationships and tools were not being recorded effectively and so the project team was frequently exposed to overdue recent changes or relevant information. Consequently, introducing the concept of sustainability to the employees will be a task to prove the impact in their work and the business as a whole, since it would include added responsibilities and new strategies.

To justify having sustainable practices, comprehensive tracking of performance in the realm of sustainability is vital to communicate trends in cost savings and resource consumption to make the business case for sustainability. Thus, the project uses a triple-bottom line approach to assess Stern Produce and translate the sustainability indicators into value for the company— provisionally titled as “Positively Impacting Business/People/Earth”. Ultimately, the Sustainability Coordinator hopes to have annual sustainability reports to communicate Stern Produce’s efforts and positive impacts on their business and community substantiated with transparent, qualitative, and quantitative indicators by the 2018 fiscal year.
To understand wholesalers like Stern Produce, existing sustainability research on food system and food supply chain participants was reviewed. Research was also conducted to seek the best approach to assess a small enterprise in the food and distribution service using a sustainability lens, as well as to determine the optimum KPIs for retrospective sustainability reporting. Based on four key questions, KPIs were selected in response to the relevancy of Stern Produce’s business, performance benchmarking, their commitments to stakeholders and answering to expectations. Thereby, the Sustainability Coordinator opted to model the project’s outcomes and expectations on the Organically Grown Company’s (OGC) 2015 sustainability report. The OGC’s report genuinely reflects their commitments as a small producer and distributor of organic goods, while cogently establishing the sustainability value to its business.

These approaches allowed the Sustainability Coordinator to transcribe Stern Produce’s overarching sustainability goals and facilitate the project team to identify Stern Produce’s sustainability focus areas. Existing sustainability self-assessment tools were used as source of past collected data and indicators. Although the project did not have the capacity to do a full assessment of the company using the suggested KPIs (based on 2016 data), much was achieved in the process. Sustainability goals for the company were established, as well as sustainability areas of focus were identified to simplify and organize the indicators. The five focus areas include: sustainable procurement (internal and external); fleet management; organizational continuity; sustainable operations; and, sustainable communities. In doing so, the Sustainability Coordinator and the company have a clearer vision of what kind of impacts and consequences they want on their business, environment and community.

Simultaneously, the Hart and Milstein’s Sustainable Value Framework (SVF) was used to evaluate the company, map their standing in sustainability efforts and to indicate intervention points for sustainable future growth. Recommendations were grounded upon strategies that improved and institutionalized pollution prevention efforts, product stewardship ventures, innovation opportunities and proactive sustainability visioning.

Though the project did not address all of the objectives given its limited timeline, the team tackled the core concerns which were formulating the sustainability vision and identifying the relevant KPIs, while exploring other concerns wherever possible. The following recommendations for completing the process were also offered. To fulfill the project specifications, more interaction with employees at all locations would be ideal to determine the most optimum procedures for reporting metrics. Moreover, increasing employee involvement deepens the sustainability commitment. This would require a larger project team to accomplish the goal of creating comprehensive sustainability report for the 2018 fiscal year. Alternatively, more participants would be ideal to identify more intervention points that are more transformative to the community and business.