



A New Green Champion

A few months ago I changed my mind about a corporate giant. The company is Wal-Mart, and in June, at its first Canadian Sustainable Packaging Exposition, I got a taste of just what lies beneath the company's often-controversial business strategies.

Wal-Mart has always had more than its fair share of detractors. From the 1980s and '90s as the mega chain began steamrolling its way across the U.S. and into Canada, Wal-Mart has been accused of a host of different ills – from questionable labour and sourcing practices, to being responsible for the death of downtown businesses in rural communities. The problem with being the big guy in the neighbourhood is that there's always someone there to challenge you.

On the other hand, having the enormous buying power and market share that Wal-Mart commands also puts you in the enviable position of being able to exert enormous influence over the industry, to set trends and watch as others follow your lead. And in many ways, Wal-Mart has been undeniably ahead of the pack when it comes to using new efficiency-oriented technology, shaping retailing trends and generally giving the people what they want, or sometimes, what they will want. Whether this has always been successful is questionable (for instance, after announcing its plan to supply organic produce, the chain has since scaled back plans, blaming lack of supply). But once again, if it's on Wal-Mart's radar it must be an issue worth noting.

That's why I was impressed by the recent pledge by Wal-Mart Canada (and by Wal-Mart operations globally) to eventually produce zero waste, to be powered 100 per cent by renewable energy and to make more environmentally preferable products available to consumers. As well as announcing this goal at the June Expo, Wal-Mart Canada president and CEO Mario Pilozzi said, "As businesses we are in a unique position to shape and drive major environmental change. I truly believe that environmental sustainability is one of the defining issues of our time."

Noting that the company's short-term goal is to reduce packaging on products it stocks by five per cent by 2013, Pilozzi added, "Over time our goal is to make sustainable packaging a formal part of our structure. Sustainability is about making good decisions for your business and for the environment."

Wal-Mart is not only challenging others to follow its lead, it's expecting it from its vendors. Food and beverage producers will be expected to fill out a "packaging scorecard" on each of their products detailing its environmental footprint and efforts to reduce packaging, comparable to others in their category. This is no nominal endeavour – measurable factors include things such as greenhouse gas emissions during production, recycled content usage, renewable energy used to produce the packaging, and emissions related to transporting that packaging.

Staged in Toronto in co-operation with the Packaging Association of Canada, the Sustainable Packaging Expo was an opportunity for packaging suppliers to tout their environmentally friendly, sustainably produced products – everything from biodegradable and recyclable products to energy-efficient packaging machinery and renewable energy solutions – to just under 200 food and beverage producers retailing with Wal-Mart. Both companies with strictly "green" agendas and those now offering an eco-range of goods and services were welcome there – a positive sign that Canada's food industry is taking the issue of sustainability seriously.

As for critics who believe the chain is simply trying to make a big splash in the green tidal wave currently sweeping over North America, I'd remind them that big splashes always make lots of ripples. As Wal-Mart Canada vice-president Guy McGuffin said in regards to Wal-Mart's foray into sustainability, "People ask 'Why Wal-Mart?' And I say, we're a big company and we have a big opportunity here. We can help our customers, and we can help the environment."

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