

## Deeper Shade of Green

By Holly Barbo

# Step into the 'Green Triangle' for Economic Sustainability

**A**s retailers, we have our own personal sustainability requirements and economic sustainability definitely comes first. We must survive in business. Environmental and social concerns can pale in comparison. At times, the "green" furniture news can seem to be an irritating trend that we perhaps don't need to address. However, such a knee-jerk reaction is based more on not wanting to change than it is on what is right—for our environment, for our community, and for our customers. Change is uncomfortable because change is uncertainty and our businesses must be sustainable first.

I understand that feeling. But let's really look at what is happening here.

"Going Green" and the concept of sustainability is not just a trend. It's a cultural and mental shift. Look at the changes Earth Day has wrought over the last 35 years. There is a switch in our consciousness level that is heightened by global warming reports. It won't be going away.

Take a look at the change in vehicle purchases. First quarter sales for 2007 of SUVs and trucks were down 14 percent while sales of small fuel efficient cars were up 14 percent. But sales of hybrid cars were up 3,000 percent, indicating that the car buyer was willing to pay more and help the environment while getting better gas mileage. These consumers were taking the first step on the "green" triangle. They were looking at their carbon footprint.

Green is as much about the customer

getting a good product as it is doing something good for the planet. Psychologists would call it "mental accounting." Let's take that customer who just bought the hybrid car, for example. He knows that after a while he will need to replace the battery in it to the tune of a few thousand dollars. But he perceives the cost as a bargain because he's doing something good. Another example is a special we run in the late fall and winter in our store. We have everyday prices and don't run sales—but during that time, if customers bring in 10 cans of food for the local food bank, they can get 10 percent off the

price of a furniture purchase. Is 10 percent very much? Not compared to a sale in other stores, but my customers love it because they are doing a good deed and are rewarding themselves for it by buying something they want. The green purchase works that way also and it doesn't have to be expensive. But the "mental accounting" for getting a better-made piece and doing something good for the environment is priceless!

You could argue that you know your customers better than anyone else and they like what you have. That is true. But it's also true that your customers are becoming more environmentally aware and that will only increase. Our job is to do our best to provide product and answers for them. Wouldn't it be better for each of

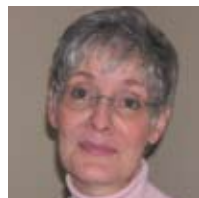
us if we had some furniture on the floor that met the "green triangle" equation (green/renewable, sustainable and low carbon footprint)?

We need to be able to accurately answer where that item was made, how it was made and what it is made of. Just

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be careful that you don't "green-wash." If we fudge our facts and we have a savvy consumer, they'll know. Once trust is lost, we've lost that customer forever. That means we need to learn now and start making some choices available to our customers.

Remember, too, that there is a lot of misinformation out there. You will have customers coming in that are totally informed. But you'll also see some with partially accurate information and others with little understanding but with a will to do the right thing for the environment. If we're better informed and can help our customers find green solutions and products, we'll have very happy customers and they will tell others. In the end, that will certainly help our personal economic sustainability! **HFB**



Holly Barbo is the owner/partner of Barbo Furniture, a Bellingham, Wash., retailer. The company also has a manufacturing arm and has always focused on sustainable practices and products. She can be reached at [hollwye@gmail.com](mailto:hollwye@gmail.com).