A local hairdressing business underwent a sustainability journey that saw it become an industry leader in resource efficiency

THE BUSINESS
Élan Hair Design is a family-run hairdressing business based in Inverurie in Aberdeenshire in the north east of Scotland. In the words of Lauren Milton, the Salon Coordinator, it was ‘started off by my grandma and my aunt in 1971, then my dad and mum joined, and myself and my sister came in later’. It is the essence of a traditional family business. And the success of its environmental journey has grown out of the drive and support that a family business can generate.

THE IDEA
The transformation of the business started when two of the family went to a seminar in Edinburgh and heard a speech on how the use of LED lighting could lower carbon emissions. ‘That was the starting point’, says Milton. A conscious decision was taken in 2009 to steadily introduce features, practices and systems that would optimise the environmental performance of the business. The conference had opened their eyes, not just to the idea that renewable energy would be good for the company, but that it would also bring financial benefits.

THE INNOVATION
While none of the things Élan has done can be said to be new ideas when viewed in isolation, they are innovators within the hairdressing industry. The business has been swift to implement a whole raft of measures and is now seen as a leader within the sector, sharing what it has done with others and with visits from peer groups from around the UK and Europe. Along the way it has also taken major brands to task for wasteful packaging and has become recognised by these leading brands as an exemplar in sustainable operations.

From the simple starting point prompted by the Edinburgh seminar, one thing has led to another until the cumulative effect is that it has become a highly sustainable and ‘green’ business. ‘If you can use LED lighting’, says Milton, ‘then you can use PV and solar panels to reduce electricity’. Financial benefits follow. ‘You can sell some electricity back to the grid as well’. ‘Then we started thinking about water consumption. If you can lower that, you can lower costs. We installed solar panels and an air-source heat pump to heat the salon and we put in low-energy radiators’.

Their research and enthusiasm continued. ‘Then we found a company which was making zero carbon furniture’, she says. ‘And we installed a backwash basin that cut water consumption by 64%’. Eventually, the business reduced water costs by 82%, representing a sizeable saving to a hair salon. They also installed flooring made from 40% reconstituted materials.

And then they imaginatively used the most obvious waste product of a hair salon. ‘We now compost all hair and towels’, she says, ‘representing 240 litres of waste a fortnight. The hair goes to local businesses. The nitrogen in the hair makes really good compost.’ On top of this, the business has reduced the waste going to landfill by 95% through the recycling of paper, plastic, foil, glass and other products.
FINANCE FUNCTION LEADERSHIP
In a small family business, finance is a shared responsibility. The capital commitment to install the renewable energy and other internal changes was over £220,000 and, while some £82,500 of that came from an Energy Savings Trust loan, the balance came from the business’s own resources, which was a very significant amount for such a small business. Before the decision, the family knew little about architectural plans, eco-heating systems or zero carbon furniture. The whole project has been driven by family enthusiasm and commitment.

POSITIVE LONG-TERM IMPACT
Suppliers are engaged around sustainability issues such as poor packaging choices and potential use of refillable containers in the salon and by customers. Increased turnover in a small town that already supports 14 other hairdressing businesses suggests the campaign has found resonance amongst customers. In the long-term, this will steadily increase the size of the market.

Under a carbon management plan in partnership with the Carbon Trust, the business has cut carbon emissions by 53% and is on target for 90% by September 2013, the equivalent of 110 tonnes of CO2 emissions.

Team members feel they are making a genuine contribution to the environment on a daily basis. They are conscious of water consumption and energy use; ensuring that water is turned off between each step of the shampooing process and appliances are switched off when not in use.

As a result of the exercise, the business is on target for a 20% increase in sales. ‘More people are coming to us because we have done this’, says Milton.

LESSONS FROM THE CASE STUDY
In the words of Lauren Milton do not forget that ‘everything takes time’. It may seem to be an expensive investment, but do not underestimate what you will get back. ‘Although it is a cost at first, the repayments, from solar panels, for example, are huge’.

And remember that the cause of sustainability, driving out waste and becoming a greener business builds its own momentum and support. ‘The team is more committed to you because you are doing something different’, says Milton.

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