

## **Interview from Spring 2007 *Carbon Copy***

### **Interview with Energy Champion: Mark Buckley**

**EPA:** You have been with Staples for 17 years. What kind of work do you do on a daily basis?

**MB:** I have been Vice President of Environmental Affairs at Staples more than four years now. My work is highly variable; I focus on improving internal processes to make the business sustainable, and I also focus on creating products and services to help customers be more sustainable. Most environmentally oriented jobs are either focused on Environmental Health and Safety or Corporate Social Responsibility, and my job has some of both. Regarding climate change, I try to look at it from the perspective of efficiency and energy conservation, such as making improvements in building design with retrofits. How we use energy has a direct and indirect impact on climate.

**EPA:** Staples is involved in a number of activities to reduce its impact on the environment. How is your department integrated into the company's operations—is change being driven from the top-down or bottom-up?

**MB:** Every aspect of our company takes our environmental impact into consideration. Change is not just promoted and encouraged by Environmental Affairs but in all levels of the company. It is important to try to link environmental benefits to business benefits—they are not opposing concepts. Many people still think of sustainability as a philanthropic or public relations exercise and that's just not the case. The impacts of these measures can be quantified and that makes the connection more real for stakeholders. A great lesson to teach is one of resource management: equate resource management today to benefits that businesses achieve and you see tangible results.

**EPA:** In relation to your experience in previous roles, what internal mechanisms make Staples more conducive to environmental stewardship?

**MB:** Staples is a young company, just 20 years old, and we are continually growing. We're currently in 22 countries. When we started, we couldn't have predicted having such incredible growth. That makes change part of our makeup—it's not something we're afraid of. Change may not always be embraced as well in older firms.

**EPA:** What obstacles do you face in improving your company's environmental footprint? Do you have advice for initiating change at a large organization, especially as a long-term manager?

**MB:** In reality, there are always people within an organization that don't understand the connection between environmental stewardship and core business goals and strategies. It is important to create a culture where environmental stewardship is part of everyone's job everyday. We have 74,000 associates—everyone must integrate environmental issues to some degree. We spend time educating associates [employees] and linking

environmental business practices to associate behavior. My advice for a large organization is to focus on creating a cultural evolution versus a paradigm shift. A paradigm shift denotes flipping a switch, but in reality, for long-term success we must incorporate issues into the cultural component of a company. A cultural evolution will effect broader and more long-lasting change but it does take time. Also, companies have to start viewing and using terms differently, such as replacing the term “waste management” with “resource management.” Although they are essentially the same terms, companies have to shift their language to shift behavior.

**EPA:** Staples joined Climate Leaders in 2002 as a Charter Partner. How do you continue to benefit from your participation in the program?

**MB:** Climate Leaders is an excellent partnership. We have limited resources to gather data. Climate Leaders’ resources made that happen and allowed us to start collecting our data globally. We wouldn’t have gotten so far without them. As part of our U.S. EPA Climate Leaders membership, Staples has voluntarily committed to a 7 percent reduction in our U.S. GHG emissions by 2010 on an absolute basis, starting from a base year of 2001. As of 2005, we had reduced our net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by nearly 5 percent versus 2001. We really like the structure of the program and the access we have to other companies struggling with the same issues in establishing targets and goals. We have many connections to the EPA through our involvement in other programs such as Plug-In To eCycling, SmartWay Transport Partnership, WasteWise, Green Power Partnership, and ENERGY STAR. Climate Leaders provides an umbrella of resources and services that help people make connections—it’s more than just a focus on emissions.

**EPA:** Staples now offers an array of environmentally-conscious products. Can you comment on this evolution?

**MB:** Staples brand products have grown significantly over the past few years, and now make up 20 percent of our total sales. We’re creating high quality products that increasingly have sustainable attributes. For example, in terms of paper, we’re shifting the paradigm in the market place to create enough vertical demand for products. We began by requesting change at the paper mills. The mills didn’t have an incentive to change since we were the only ones asking and the volume wasn’t high enough. We had to increase vertical demand in the marketplace. To do that, we had to change our behavior internally to make a bigger purchase. Instead of placing recycled paper as a higher priced niche product, we converted a large part of the paper we sell to recycled paper. We increased the volume of production so the supplier can buy from a secondary market and the market will run more efficiently. We’ve increased the average amount of post-consumer recycled content across all of our paper products sold by weight from less than 20 percent in 2003 to 30 percent in 2005. File folders were 100 percent virgin wood fiber five years ago. Three years ago they consisted of ten percent post-consumer content. Today, there is no virgin alternative for file folders or for any of our paper products. The products now offered are priced nearly as low as the price of the virgin products. Our goal was to stabilize the market and add credibility. One of our achievements is to require

vendors bidding to supply large-volume paper products like copy, print, and notebook filler paper to complete an environmental survey, including descriptions of their forest sources, characteristics of the fiber sourced, and mill-specific information to help us select responsible paper suppliers. One impact of these corporate responsibility efforts is to promote sustainable forestry, which can help combat climate change by providing carbon sinks and renewable fuels. We help sponsor the resource tool Earth 911 Business to provide helpful environmental resources, tools, and information to businesses nationally, with a focus on waste reduction, recycling, and the purchase of environmentally preferable products.

**EPA:** What do you think about competitors entering the market for recycled products?

**MB:** We welcome others offering recycled products in the market. It increases recovery rates and spurs continuous improvement. The more others help us leverage the market by diversifying their portfolio, the easier it will be to shift the marketplace towards the production of sustainable products.

**EPA:** Will Staples be offering climate-friendly products in the future?

**MB:** Yes, we plan to. It's just smart business to create environmentally preferable products. Our goal is to produce high quality products that are also great for the planet. There are a myriad of approaches—with climate change there is no silver bullet. We try to diversify our portfolio. We are committing to going beyond recycled content to offering paper products composed of alternative fibers and tree fiber from certified and sustainably managed forests where feasible. It helps to take a life cycle approach. For example, we've considered the environmental life cycle of cotton and we're considering using the cotton from old denim in our products since, historically, cotton goes directly to landfills. We're looking at the process of production holistically, from packaging to supply chain to raw materials. Continuous improvement is a journey, not a plateau.

**EPA:** Why do you think Staples and other companies are taking steps to mitigate their impact on climate change?

**MB:** Recent events have garnered attention on the issue of climate change. Hurricane Katrina was galvanizing for many people. The hurricane season raises awareness, and so do climate trends in North America. My house is 40 miles north of Boston and we had frogs jumping across the street in December—that's not normal. The geopolitical effects of energy dependence are garnering attention and clean energy is emerging as a viable option. The investment community is starting to move large sums of money from the margins to the mainstream. Companies that are not historically green, such as Wal-Mart, are bringing a lot of attention to the issues. Clearly, given their footprint they can have an enormous impact. GE invested billions on research and development because they understand the future of clean energy. It's no longer a marginal discussion. We're at an interesting stage as a country. We went from asking "Is [climate change] real?" to "What are we going to do about it?" and that is very motivating.

*We would like to thank Mark Buckley for sharing his insight with Carbon Copy.*