

Growing lean, green, money-making machines

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Winner...Gillian Milne accepting her award with VECCI chief executive Wayne Kayler-Thomson.

Many small business owners are so focused on daily operations they seldom have a chance to consider whether their business is running sustainably.

But a sustainable business means less waste and therefore higher profits, and an initiative by the Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry is giving small business support and a step-by-step plan to help bring about positive change.

VECCI's Grow Me The Money is a 12-part program that leads business through the process of increasing their profitability and reducing their carbon footprint.

Products manager for the VECCI sustainability services division, Erin Simpson, says business owners are usually drawn to the program for one of two reasons.

"You have businesses that are driven by personal value and interest in reducing their environmental impact and that's usually something that sits with an owner or key manager. Then you have businesses that simply see waste and want to do something to reduce that, with a key interest to save money."

Grow Me The Money has been running for three years with funding assistance from the Victorian Government's Environment Protection Authority and this year enjoyed a 40 per cent increase in participants. The program has been undertaken by more than 1300 businesses around Australia, but Simpson has much higher aspirations.

"There are 480,000 small businesses in Victoria alone and we'd like to see every one of them using the 12 steps," she says.

Grow Me The Money has been created with an understanding of the time and resource pressures faced by small business operators.

"The environment is not really the key driver for someone who's time poor and lacks internal capacity to take on these opportunities," she says.

In response to the differing needs, the program offers two streams of support. The basic level includes a suite of tools to conduct a self-assessment of energy use, waste and transport, and create an action plan for reduction. The more hands-on version offers external support for those businesses that don't have the staff or resources to implement changes internally.

Businesses that have taken part in the program have found benefits they didn't expect, including a higher level of staff engagement and being linked in with a network of like-minded small businesses.

Tony McManus of McManus Real Estate in Lara, in greater Geelong, signed his business up for the program a year ago. He appointed two staff to implement the program.

"We formed a green team within the office - they got excited about it and were really engaged."

McManus Real Estate, an office with 13 staff, not only implemented the program into its own office but also applied the sustainable model to the 460 rental properties it manages. The office is also creating a drought-proof garden – using pebble mix, stone and succulent plants that don't require much water to thrive – as a visible example to inspire others in the community to adopt sustainable initiatives.

"The motivation is doing something positive about reducing our carbon footprint and also spreading the word. It was something fresh and new and was one of many things to come across my desk, and sometimes they get lost in the pile, but by engaging staff members it was implemented and has been quite empowering for them."

Gillian Milne runs Grassroots Productions, a full service event management company that specialises in sustainable events ranging from 'green' weddings to corporate functions. Milne only has one staff member so she utilised the external support stream offered by Grow Me The Money.

Milne said she took part in the program because she is passionate about running a holistic business, however she found added benefits to being involved.

"They have these small networking events called Green Teas where you can meet other businesses who are going through the program – it's definitely worth it, just to have that level of engagement."

As part of her action plan stemming from Grow Me The Money, Milne is creating contracts with suppliers that formalise environmental standards and ethics, and is building a database of compliant suppliers.

As a marker of its burgeoning presence in the sustainability space, Grow Me The Money held its inaugural Awards for Action earlier this month. Entrants were judged on the creativity, leadership and holistic approach of their sustainability plan.

McManus Real Estate and Grassroots Productions were both winners in their categories – divided by staff numbers. The other winners were: Able Plastics, Organic Angels, Third Ecology, Australian Business Arts Foundation, Express Promotions, Isuzu, Blake Dawson and The Body Shop.

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