Unilever and its Supply Chain: Embracing Radical Transparency to Implement Sustainability

Erica Dhawan, Elisha Goodman, Shayna Harris, and Chris Mitchell 15.915, S-Lab Final report, May 12, 2010 Unilever contact: David Pendlington

Introduction

When a company with a well-established supply chain enters the sustainability space, it is understandably with trepidation, and in the best-case scenario, with curiosity and a willingness to experiment. In order to drive sustainability changes, there are a plethora of places to start – from shifting consumer buying patterns, to farmers' production practices, to corporate culture. Commonly, large multinationals rely on multiple product streams going into multiple product lines; the task to 'green' the entire supply chain is daunting, and the process iterative. A company must do two things over and over again. First, the company must find the appropriate tools to help prioritize a starting place. Second, once this prioritization process happens, the company must dig into an evolving toolbox of items which can drive sustainability down the supply chain and ensure compliance in the areas that the company is seeking sustainability. Finally, the company must follow these steps over and over again – capturing learning as the tools are applied – and then re-evaluating its sustainability priorities up and down the supply chain.

To assist Unilever with this iterative process, Unilever requested two primary tasks. First, Unilever wanted high-level strategies and frameworks with which the company can make decisions about where to begin implementing sustainability measures across its vast supply chain. Second, Unilever asked for a discussion of ways that the company could drive sustainability down the supply chain and verify supply chain sustainability compliance, particularly in cases where Unilever did not use 3rd party certification schemes. To satisfy Unilever's requests, our team began by researching background information on Unilever and its sustainability values and practices, using mainly external literature sources and the limited internal Unilever documents for which we had access. We also tapped into MiT's network of sustainability experts in the Media Lab and Center for Transportation and Logistics. After several brainstorming sessions discussing various prioritization schemes that Unilever could employ, we developed a supply chain prioritization tool called the Sustainability Stakeholder Rating Tool (SSRT). Taking into account the complex supply chain ecosystem, the tool is meant to prioritize supply chain actions based on a combination of financial, social, and environmental consideration in various product lines (dairy, oil, and vegetables) from the perspective of Unilever's main stakeholders.

The culmination of these exercises is reported below and is split into four sections. First, the paper provides a background on Unilever as a company. Second, this document discusses several lenses with which Unilever may view their options to find the most optimal starting point or points to enact sustainability measures. The paper then demonstrates one such tool, Sustainability Stakeholder Rating.

Unilever And Its Supply Chain Embracing Radical Transparency

Rosina Ehmann

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