



Case Study: The Real Seed Collection Company Ltd

Safeguarding the Future

sustainable development training
for the professional business



Environmental Management for the Future

sustainable development
training for the Environmental
Management sector

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Introduction and Background

The Real Seed Collection Company Ltd is a not-for-profit company, limited by guarantee. This structure was a conscious decision as, morally, the directors believe that the interests of customers and staff are more important than those of shareholders. A limited company, by law, must always primarily act in the best interest of its shareholders. Established in 1997, the company has been based on approximately 2 acres (~1ha) of land in South Wales at Brithdir Mawr Farm, Newport, Pembrokeshire since 2004. Two full-time and four part-time employees run the 'Real Seed Catalogue', the trading name of a membership-based seed club and private collection of rare, heirloom and unusual vegetables, selected particularly for the home grower.

Company Aim

To assemble a collection of really reliable, tasty and interesting, non-hybrid vegetables for the home gardener, allotment grower, or smallholder.

Drivers for Sustainable Development

The aim to establish truly sustainable, land based livelihoods which neither 'strip-mine the soil' nor 'mine the future', underlie the company's commitment to sustainable development. This has helped the company establish a unique niche for itself in a market dominated by large-scale seed producers geared towards industrial farming. As one of the company's founders pointed out, *"We can't compete on price. Our seeds actually germinate. And our catalogue is written by people who actually grow plants!"* The company's commitment to sustainable development extends

well beyond legislative requirements and encompasses social, economic and environmental concerns. Whilst the company's sustainability performance is largely driven by the personal commitment of its founders, they recognise that the growing awareness of environmental issues presents numerous opportunities for business. However, the company is very critical of the apparently tokenistic way some companies approach environmental issues.

Customer preference also helps to drive the business's commitment to sustainability. This is illustrated by their growing and loyal customer base. Finally, the Real Seed Collection Company sees its sustainability commitment as a good medium- and long-term investment, due to the future threats posed by peak oil and climate change. It sees these factors as likely to increase fuel prices and favour those companies able to operate without large ecological footprints.



Source: The Real Seed Collection Company Ltd



The Practice

With its deep-rooted commitment to home growers and small-scale food production, the social and economic dimensions of sustainability are as keenly promoted by the company as are the environmental ones. As one founding director commented, *“Most businesses are extractive, consuming resources to increase their wealth. Within this model, the idea of a sustainable business is an oxymoron”*. In contrast, the company is keen to work with and empower customers, suppliers and staff. Its not-for-profit status was a conscious choice to create a more sustainable business model. This commitment to all three pillars of sustainability can further be seen in the way the company approaches its core business, ‘The Real Seed Catalogue’. All the varieties in the Catalogue have been chosen from personal experience for their performance in both the garden and the kitchen. The company tries everything; from growing, to seed-saving and final-produce eating, before offering the seed.

Reversing the protectionist trend in an industry increasingly controlled by patents and terminator seeds, the Real Seed Collection Company actively encourages its customers to save their own seed in order to be better able to feed themselves in the future. Every packet of seed sold (65,000 in 2006) comes complete with seed-saving instructions. For the more unusual plants, there are also recipes.

Email advice is freely available on any aspect of saving seeds, also growing the plants, harvesting and preparing food. In order to comply with EU legislation which is significantly reducing the number of varieties which can legally be sold to the public, one pence of a customer’s first order each year pays for membership of The Real Seed Club, so the company is dealing with club members, rather than members of the ‘public’. However, the company is clear that *“this is truly not just an exercise to avoid falling foul of the regulations”*. Feedback from members is taken very seriously by the company, which accredits some of the quality and success of the Catalogue to this feedback over many years from people all over the UK. Members also receive a free copy of the company’s annual Newsletter by email.

The Real Seed Collection Company also has a strict policy of no GMO, hybrid seed or chemical treatment. They describe themselves as ‘philosophically organic’ but not certified organic due to the added cost and bureaucracy. The emphasis on quality seed that is grown one year and sold the next (as opposed to the 3-5 year industry norm) results in high germination rates, high growth and flavour performance. This enables them to offer the following guarantee:

If you are in any way not completely happy with your seeds, plants, or even the flavour of the resulting crop, we will cheerfully replace your seed, refund your money, or send a credit note - whichever you prefer.

The company is also keen to contribute to the local society and economy within which it is based. All employees are drawn from the local area, the local Post Office is used for the core business activity of posting seed, and the company contributes to local events such as seed exchanges, and donates seed to local schools.



Carbon Footprint

The company has undertaken numerous measures to reduce its carbon footprint and address its commitment to environmental sustainability. These include commissioning an ecological footprint audit of the business. The office and seed storage areas are powered by renewable energy and heated by wood from sustainably-managed sources. The company recently halved its postage waste by using smaller seed distribution packages, and encouraging their re-use. Their computer is seven years old and fully serves their purpose, so they have no intention to replace this.

The most significant finding of the environmental audit, however, was the impact that transport has upon the overall footprint of the business. For example, they have experimented with various low-impact means of working the land, including using hand tools rather than a rotavator. However, they conclude that far more significant is whether they cycle, walk or drive the four miles round-trip into Newport, the local town, to take deliveries to the Post Office. *"This is the average car journey in the UK and it's equivalent to 20 loads of washing or baling a dozen bales of hay with a tractor,"* states the audit. They have begun to address this issue by switching longer journeys from car to train, as they found this, of all their activities, was the biggest improvement they could make. Their approach to sustainability is holistic, so that the impacts of employees individually, as well as the business as a whole, were felt to be important. *"I think it's really important that people don't miss the point, for example working hard to create sustainable businesses, and then flying in their personal life,"* said one of the directors.

Economic Sustainability

Wages were initially low when the business was established, but they have risen approximately four-fold as turnover and profitability have increased. All employees, including the directors, receive the same amount. This rate is the basic wage, but everyone receives end-of-year bonuses as well. These bonuses depend on sales. The company has never received any grants or outside assistance and has always been fully self-funding and run. This independence is a significant part of the company's wider approach to sustainability. *"I think subsidy is the death knoll of small businesses,"* as one employee put it, explaining that the company felt that this led to companies being geared towards the needs of paperwork, rather than focusing on what was good for business. However, there was a feeling that support to help the company when they took on new employees would be useful in addressing the skills' shortage, and thus significant training needs, of new employees. One suggestion is an adjustment of the social benefit system to allow small employers to pay new employees, who are generally less-productive for the first six months or so of employment, using government or EU subsidies.



Opportunities and Obstacles

In addition to help with training employees, there was a suggestion that the sustainability of the industry generally, and the company specifically, could be helped by simple changes. For example, it was felt the land-use planning system could be adjusted to encourage smallholdings of around 6 acres (~2.5ha) with agricultural ties, because smallholdings of this size are demonstrably more productive per acre than larger units. Currently, the cost of land is a significant barrier to both the business and the wider industry. Creating new categories of land which were tied to sustainable, land-based activity was seen as one means of overcoming this.

Despite its overall small ecological footprint, one issue identified as a barrier to reducing the footprint further was the need for plastic bags to keep the seeds fresh and waterproof. Currently bio-degradable substitutes are unable to achieve this. Finally, a 'Buy Local' campaign was suggested as a significant opportunity which could be encouraged by local and national government to support the industry and build on the current resurgence of interest in local food.



*Source: The Real Seed
Collection Company Ltd*

Progress and Learning

This company is sufficiently small that it generally relies on an informal mechanism to monitor and measure its sustainability performance. However, it does use more formal mechanisms from time to time, as illustrated by the ecological footprint audit. The company takes its customers very seriously and uses feedback actively to monitor and modify its performance.

The company has grown by 180% each year for the last few years, and sees that there is sufficient market for this to continue into the future. This could eventually lead to a large seed-producing company based on 30 acres (~12ha) and employing ten people full-time. However, the price of land remains the main obstacle to achieving this, furthermore the company itself has not yet determined that it wishes to grow to this size.