

WORK IT OUT

A happier workforce means happier customers. By **CAITLIN SYKES**

Better connecting with customers has been a driver for workplace sustainability says Suzie Marsden, Westpac's head of sustainability



WHEN URGENT COURIERS surveys its customers they frequently comment on how its courier drivers smile when they come through the door.

“You think ‘that’s simple. Why doesn’t everyone do that?’” says Steve Bonnici, founder and managing director of the company named winner of the Sustainable 60 workplace category. “But it’s bloody hard to make people smile when they’re not earning enough to put bread on the table.”

When the company completed its first sustainability report back in 2001, one of the major findings was that its contractor courier drivers simply weren’t making enough money.

“It was a real challenge for us. It was like ‘wow! We need to be charging something like 50% more than we are right now. How the hell can we do that and still be in business?’ And it wasn’t necessarily something that you could do instantly.”

Historically, the courier industry has had a high rate of contractor drivers going bust, simply because it’s so hard to make a buck. Huge growth in the 1990s meant courier drivers could do extra work to supplement lagging incomes, but the industry soon began reaching capacity, and other factors — like increased traffic congestion — also hindered growth.

The only viable option to address the issue of contractor viability, says Bonnici, was to increase prices. “We had to be pretty bold and decide, yes we are going to implement a price increase every year.

“But the rest of our competitors were facing the same issues. So when someone took a lead like that, the industry sort of came along.”

The company measures driver earnings every day and it’s still a battle to keep them at a sustainable level, says Bonnici. The tough economic conditions of the past year have been a real challenge, with competitors “madly undercutting” to gain market share.

“Unfortunately it’s the person behind the wheel of the car that suffers if they’re a contractor.”

Urgent Couriers has implemented a number of other initiatives to help its contractors keep their heads above water, including integrating accounts training into its overall training programme, tax seminars for contractors and a tax trust savings account system. Urgent’s programme to change its

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fleet to low-emission vehicles also puts more money in drivers’ pockets, says Bonnici, because they spend less on fuel.

And a happier workforce means happier customers, he reckons; clients like that the company treats its people fairly and with respect. “Our customers are generally very loyal, and stay with us.”

Better connecting with customers has also been a driver for workplace sustainability efforts at Westpac New Zealand, says the bank’s head of sustainability, Suzie Marsden.

Technology has wrought huge changes in the banking industry in recent years and customers now go online to do many of the things they once did at a local branch. When customers do go to a branch, it’s often to discuss big issues that are happening in their lives and how their bank can help.

“One of the things we have understood from our customers is they really want to have really skilled, capable people to give them options around financial solutions and then to give them some great advice,” says Marsden, “and it’s the great advice bit that we haven’t necessarily been doing so well in — it has been pulling down our customer advocacy. So what we have been doing is really investing in our frontline capability.”

The focus has been on empowering local business teams to do the right thing by their customers and, despite the recession, the bank has increased its spend on learning and development. That started by boosting the level of business acumen among its local leaders — ‘turning local branch managers into bank managers’, as the bank puts it. Lender accreditation, product knowledge training and improving sales and service disciplines for frontline staff have also been a focus. “It’s about improving the customer experience by helping our staff think about things customers are looking for when they’re wanting good service. It sounds basic, but we have underinvested in that in the past.”

Other workplace paybacks from the gamut

of sustainability measures implemented by Westpac include increased staff engagement levels and “tremendous response” to positions advertised by the bank.

“Part of being a high-performing organisation is attracting great talent,” says Marsden, “and it [sustainability] pays dividends in us attracting really top talent to our organisation.”

North Shore City Council cites setting up its corporate sustainability team as an example of workplace success, with the team’s work driving a wider cultural shift in the organisation. The council’s sustainability manager, Michael Field, was a corporate sustainability consultant before starting at the local authority almost three years ago. As the guy often brought in by companies to fix sustainability strategies and initiatives gone wrong, Field says he learnt plenty about what not to do.

Field describes the council as a “decentralised” organisation — operating like dozens of individual businesses under one banner — and that “makes it very difficult to engage in a corporate programme that’s organisational wide”.

Key to the success of the council’s sustainability team, therefore, has been getting its work endorsed by the highest levels of the organisation. Field reports to the CFO for example, and both the corporate sustainability policy and management plan drawn up by the team have been endorsed by the council.

“Everyone’s employment contract states quite clearly that it is a condition of their employment that they follow all policies and procedures of the council,” says Field.

Getting buy-in has then largely been down to good communication, he says. Attending team meetings, holding training sessions, communicating through the intranet and running visual programmes reminding staff to do things like take the stairs and turn off computer monitors are among the ways the team has driven home sustainability messages.

And it’s working, says Field. Compliance rates with the council’s energy efficiency and waste minimisation programmes are up around 80%; staff are feeding back suggestions on how to further the council’s sustainability efforts. “It’s that always touching base,” says Field, “and always reporting back.”