

The business case for sustainable IT

By Megan Santosus, August 12, 2009

It's not surprising that many green IT initiatives focus on improving energy efficiency. After all, according to a well-publicized report by the Environmental Protection Agency, servers and data centers were responsible for 1.5 percent of all the electricity consumed in the United States in 2006.

For channel partners serving SMBs, however, the drive to reduce power consumption has limits, given the amount of IT equipment that most SMBs require to run their businesses. Many partners may therefore dismiss green IT as the exclusive domain of large organizations.

Yet, when the idea of green IT is expanded to include ways in which IT can help businesses become more sustainable by reducing their carbon footprint -- and saving money in the process -- the prospect of selling green solutions becomes imminently more promising.

Just how big is the market for green IT? In his report, *"Market Overview: Green IT Services"*, Christopher Mines, senior vice president at Forrester Research Inc., estimates that the total market for green IT will reach \$4.8 billion in 2013, up from \$450 million in 2008.

The trick for channel partners interested in grabbing a piece of the pie is offering solutions that appeal to SMBs' environmental mandates and business needs.

"There is a misconception that being more environmentally friendly is expensive," said Richard Hodges, founder and CEO of GreenIT, an IT consulting firm in Sonoma, Calif., that specializes in sustainable IT design, management, and education. "Sustainable IT should really have economic, social, and environmental benefits."

A 2008 survey sponsored by Microsoft points to the growing interest in sustainability among SMBs.

The survey polled 250 IT decision makers at small businesses; 69 per cent of respondents said that being environmentally friendly is important; 94 per cent said technology is an important tool for becoming greener. Among the most promising cost-saving sustainable practices respondents identified were allowing telecommuting, using mobile technology, and conducting Web-based meetings.

Certainly, SMBs are looking to reduce costs, and doing so while decreasing environmental impact can be a winning proposition for channel partners. To provide the most appropriate sustainable solutions, channel partners have to alter the mentality of simply selling products, and instead think in terms of assessments to determine the areas that can benefit from specific IT solutions.

"You have to look at the energy consumption of the business as well as management and behavioral practices," says Jessica Vreeswijk, founder and director of TerraBytes Consulting, a green IT consulting firm in Victoria, B.C. After conducting a thorough analysis to uncover places where IT can enable the business to use more sustainable practices, channel partners can then implement the best solutions.

Initiatives such as managed print services, document management, refurbished hardware, Web conferencing and collaboration tools, and a host of technologies that can bridge the gap between home and

office, can allow partners to expand their business footprint while helping clients reduce their environmental footprint.

"Many SMBs are struggling to do more with less right now," said Jeff Nelson, president and CEO of Anexio Inc., an IT services provider in Sarasota, Fla. "One of the biggest challenges in implementing green IT is to build the business cases for how SMBs can save money."

One way to get started is to deploy technologies that lead to tangible savings. The use of paper is certainly an easy thing to quantify. "There is definitely paper savings to be had in using scanning and capture technologies," said Omri Duek, a consultant at InfoTrends Inc., a market research firm that serves the digital imaging and document management industry.

Software such as enterprise content management (ECM) that enables organizations to centrally store and search documents on a shared server can take a big bite out of paper use, especially if traditional paper-based processes are reengineered to accommodate digital technology. "Given that 60 percent of documents are printed, organizations are still not taking advantage of digital technologies," Duek said.

Paper and toner can often be reduced by setting up print optimization policies (two-sided printing, for example) and limiting the number of printers, copiers, and fax machines. "In some places, there will be a ratio of people to devices of 4-to-1," said GreenIT's Hodges. "The ratio should really be anywhere from 8-to-1 or even 16-to-1."

With fewer devices, people generally will print less, simply because it is not as convenient. Hodges recommends replacing desktop printers with multifunction devices or offering managed print services. "The goal doesn't have to be to go paperless, but to use less paper," Hodges added.

Dave Dadian, the CEO of powersolution.com, an IT solution provider in Ho-Ho-Kus, N.J., cautions that the push to reduce paper by introducing electronic information systems can have a detrimental effect on sustainability. "If you are scanning a vast amount of documents, you may have to provide storage, which will increase power usage," he said. So it's important to do a thorough cost analysis to ensure that the environmental impact isn't simply being shifted from paper to electricity.

Hodges recommends that channel partners implement practices such as information lifecycle management and deduplication -- two things that will periodically cull the amount of information that is stored electronically. In fact, Hodges sees many opportunities for providing value-added services. "If you are implementing electronic medical records, you can also provide backup and storage services off-site," he said.

Another opportunity is managed print services, which can help customers quantifiably reduce paper use while offloading the maintenance and supply replenishment issues that go along with running a printer. "Most businesses have no idea how many pages they print or how much toner and ink they use," said InfoTrends' Duek.

Using print optimization software, channel partners can implement a system that intelligently tracks and prints documents, and then keeps an exact record of how much paper is used for printing and where it is printed.

An organization can also establish policies aimed at making printing more sustainable such as restricting color printing and routing documents to the most efficient printer. "We are seeing a lot of organizations adopt managed print services, and a lot of IT resellers and copier dealers getting into that service," said Duek.

Web conferencing, another sustainable practice, enables employees and customers to meet virtually, saving the time, expense, and environmental effect of travel. Anexio has implemented a number of commercial

virtual meeting solutions for clients including Go-to-Meeting, WebEx, and ooVoo -- a technology that allows six people to meet virtually. In addition, Anexio has created custom solutions using Windows Live along with a video component.

Such technology can also be utilized to encourage telecommuting among employees. "There is an opportunity to accommodate remote employees by looking at ways to facilitate how [they] connect to the office," said Anexio's Nelson. His company has deployed Microsoft Terminal Server and Citrix Remote Access for clients that enable employees to work remotely. Nelson also says that VoIP systems can provide seamless communications from home or remote locations to an office.

Channel partners can also offer services and practices to promote sustainability. One concept is to prolong the life of hardware by conducting regular maintenance and upgrades. "It's very cost effective," said Bob Houghton, president and founder of Redemtech Inc., an IT asset recovery and disposition company in Columbus, Ohio. "For PCs, it makes great economic sense to extend their life from three or four years up to five or six years."

It also makes environmental sense, because the overwhelming majority of the energy associated with hardware -- about 80 percent, according to Houghton -- is consumed during the manufacturing process and not hardware use. And the e-waste that can be reduced by extending the life of hardware has a tremendous environmental benefit as well.

In addition to frequent maintenance, Houghton recommends midlife upgrades of memory and all the major touchpoints such as the keyboard and mouse. He also advocates reimaging the machines. "Over time, it's typical that a PC will accumulate junk software such as spyware," he said. Reimaging will often give performance a noticeable boost.

Going with refurbished PCs is another sustainable strategy. Redemtech markets its own brand of "refurbs" called Red Rabbitt; each refurb goes through diagnostics, testing, and a thorough cleaning. The machines include a licensed Microsoft operating system with all the support and functionality found on a new PC. "If a server is doing most of the work, a refurb is a great way to save money," Houghton said.

To deliver sustainable solutions, channel partners need to be more like consultants who work with clients to identify areas that can benefit from specific, sustainable technology. As typifies a consulting engagement, Hodges implements sustainable IT projects once he identifies program areas, then specific project areas, and finally tasks to carry out those projects.

For example, telecommuting may be a specific program area; Web conferencing and collaboration technologies would be the associated project areas; and evaluating and implementing specific tools and training staff are among the tasks needed to be successful.

For more information:

*[Basel Action Network](#): An organization focused on preventing e-waste.

*[e-Stewards](#): Information about responsible electronics recycling.

*[GreenITTools.com](#): A list of sustainable IT and business resources.

**[Green IT Seminars](#): Seminars offered by GreenIT, including one aimed at teaching VARs about green IT market opportunities.

[This story was originally published in ChannelPro-SMB.](#)