



Western Talent & Innovation Review

Maple Leaf Foods' Pursuit of Sustainability

Graeson C. Bergen

Editor's Note: This article is published as part of the joint [Soul of the Next Economy Forum](#) (SNEF) and *Western Talent & Innovation Review* Special Edition. The SNE Forum is held in Calgary Alberta each fall and is where business, the non-profit sector, government, and educational institutions converge to change the way we do business and impact society. The article below was written by an attendee of the September 2018 Forum.



Abstract

A representative of Maple Leaf Foods (Lynda Kuhn) spoke at the 2018 Soul of the Next Economy Forum. This article discusses the environmental and social issues of the food industry and what Maple Leaf Foods is doing to support sustainability. This paper argues that these approaches are rooted in creating shared value and positive organizational behaviour.

"Nobody in business can know these things and just carry on as though they were irrelevant to us."¹

- Lynda Kuhn

In this quote, Lynda Kuhn, senior vice president of sustainability at Maple Leaf Foods, stresses the importance of the many problems that the food industry faces today. These problems consist of climate change, resource depletion, animal welfare, and food insecurity. However, Maple Leaf Foods is not a corporation that is intimidated by the scale of these issues. Kuhn believes these issues can be solved using creativity and innovation.

Maple Leaf Foods is a major leader in sustainability in the food industry. The organization has made it their mission to address these issues in any way that is possible. This paper will review the environmental and social issues of the

food industry and what Maple Leaf Foods is doing to support sustainability. It will show how this approach is rooted in creating shared value and in positive organizational behaviour.

Maple Leaf Foods

Maple Leaf Foods is a Canadian packaged meats producer based in Mississauga, Ontario. They currently have 11,500 employees. They own Schneiders, Lunch Mate, Holiday, and various other household food brands. They are also one of the largest agriculture businesses in Canada owning many poultry and hog farms across the nation. Maple Leaf Foods' vision is to become the most sustainable protein company in the world.²

Environmental and Social Issues in the Food Industry

Tara Garnett outlines major environmental issues that the food industry is generating. Garnett states that between 15% and 28% of greenhouse gases come from the food system alone. The largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions is agricultural production, being responsible for nearly half of food-related greenhouse gas emissions. This does not include agriculturally induced deforestation which is an additional 6-17% of greenhouse gases. Additionally, agriculturally induced deforestation is also the biggest contributor to biodiversity loss globally.³ Unfortunately the negative impact that the food industry has on the environment will only get worse.

The aforementioned is not the only problems the food industry faces, and will continue to face. There are also a number of social problems that need to be addressed. Garnett also mentions the excess and insufficiency issues at the nutritional level in the food industry. Garnett writes that

“Globally about 35% of adults are overweight, with half a billion of them obese. Obesity is affecting people at ever younger ages: today 43 million preschool children or nearly 7% of all under fives, are overweight. Obesity and its attendant health consequences are, moreover, no longer only rich world problems.”⁴

In contrast, approximately 11.2% of the global population is malnourished, and about 3.5 million children under the age of 5 die from malnutrition.⁵ Another issue is growing population. In an article entitled *Food Security: The Challenge of Feeding 9 Billion People*, Godfray et al. mentions that the global population is expected to grow to 9 billion people by the middle of this century. More people are entering the middle class as the global population grows. An expanding middle class means an even higher demand for processed foods, especially meat. Furthermore, Godfray et al. argues that “at the same time, food producers are experiencing greater competition for land, water, and energy, and the need to curb the many negative effects of food production on the environment is becoming increasingly clear.”⁶ It is evident that the food industry has created some complex issues, and Maple Leaf Foods seems to be on the forefront of addressing them.

Maple Leaf Foods' Plan of Attack

In Lynda Kuhn's talk at the *Soul of the Next Economy Forum*, she outlined some of the various problems that the food industry faces. In her presentation, Kuhn noted that:

The food system contributes almost a third of global greenhouse gas emissions, and livestock production is a primary contributor. Farming consumes 75% of freshwater used globally, and over 75% of agricultural land is used for livestock production. ... The world's population is expected to grow by 2.5 billion people by 2050. ... Food and especially meat demands is expected to almost double. ... The world and its growing population cannot sustain North American levels of meat consumption, ... and globally a third of our food is actually wasted -- never meets the human stomach. ... this has led to the perverse situation where there is 2.5 times as many obese people as there is malnourished people.⁷

The problems Kuhn listed are consistent with the statistics discussed earlier in this paper. Kuhn believes that Maple Leaf Foods is tasked with the responsibility of solving these problems through innovation.

Maple Leaf Foods is the largest producer of fresh and prepared meats in Canada by a significant margin. Considering that the current levels of meat consumption are not sustainable as the population grows, Maple Leaf Foods has decided to make a change in meat production. Kuhn mentioned that they are a North American leader in the emerging market for plant-based proteins. In the past two years, Maple Leaf Foods has acquired several plant-based protein companies that produce vegan alternatives of meat products. This is not only an effort to reach the vegan market, but also a move to a more sustainable food system in terms of protein consumption. By 2025, their goal is to lower their environmental footprint by 50%. They plan on doing so by focusing on three areas: reducing their environmental footprint intensity in areas of energy, water, emissions and waste; improving their waste diversion rate; and conducting a life cycle assessment of Maple Leaf Foods products.⁸

They are also making strides in the social problem of food insecurity. Kuhn also mentioned that there are 4 million Canadians that face food insecurity. Maple Leaf Foods has partnered with many other organizations with the following mission:

The Maple Leaf Centre for Action on Food Security ("the Centre") collaborates with other organizations and individuals to advance food security. We are seeking to raise the profile of this pressing social issue, advocate for critical policies and invest in programs required to make sustainable improvements. Bringing financial and significant collaboration and in-kind support, the Centre works with innovative food-based programs that advance the capacity of people and communities to achieve sustainable food security, and have the potential to be replicated or scaled to increase their impact.⁹

Maple Leaf Foods is promoting sustainability on all fronts of environmental and social issues in the food industry, but why are they going above and beyond? It may be reasonable to think that these initiatives are expensive, and they could potentially lose profits by dumping funds into projects towards sustainability. I believe that the answer lies in the concepts of shared value and positive organizational behaviour.

Shared Value and Positive Organizational Behaviour

The answer to the question above lies in Maple Leaf Foods' six core values, and the idea of creating "shared value." Harvard Business School's Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness defines shared value as "Corporate policies and practices that enhance the competitive advantage and profitability of the company while simultaneously advancing social and economic conditions in the communities in which it sells and operates."¹⁰ This is the very essence of what Maple Leaf Foods is pursuing. Making efforts towards sustainability and social justice does not mean a business must sacrifice profitability. In fact, businesses can become more profitable by following the principle of shared value.

In addition to shared value, Maple Leaf Foods has a second competitive edge. One of the main drivers in Maple Leaf Food's push for sustainability is their six solid core values that are rooted in positive organizational behaviour ideas. Their six core values are the following:

1. Do what's right. By acting with integrity, behaving responsibly and treating people with respect;
2. Deliver winning results. By expecting to win; owning personal and collective accountability to deliver; taking appropriate risks without fear of failure while challenging for constant improvement;
3. Build collaborative teams. By attracting only the best people and serving, recognizing and rewarding their development and success; fostering a collaborative and open environment with the freedom to disagree but always making timely decisions and aligning behind them;

4. Get things done in a fact based, disciplined way. By seizing the initiative with the highest level of urgency and energy; meeting all commitments responsibly while being objective, analytical and using effective process;
5. Learn and grow, inwardly and outwardly. By being introspective personally and organizationally; freely admitting mistakes or development needs; deeply understanding and connecting with consumers and stakeholders globally as a primary source of learning and growth;
6. Dare to be transparent, passionate and humble. By having the self-confidence and courage to be completely candid and direct; willing to communicate openly in a trusting manner; acting with passion, conviction and personal humility, especially when delivering winning results.¹¹

One of the main reasons why Maple Leaf Foods is a leader in sustainability is social responsibility is ingrained in their corporate culture.

Having strong core values also grants a competitive edge. Ahn & Park suggest that having strong core values will contribute to a corporation's longevity. From their research they conclude the following:

*"Maintaining a single value can lead to better adaptation to changes. The research model in this paper suggests that corporate social responsibility principles followed by the Korean long-lived companies enable the companies' long-term survival."*¹²

This further solidifies the idea of shared value. Having strong core values based on positive organizational behaviour principles not only results in serving the common good, but it also gives Maple Leaf Foods an advantage in the food industry.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the environmental issues caused by the food industry such as greenhouse gas emissions, over usage of the world's freshwater supply in agriculture, and agriculture induced deforestation. Additionally, this paper discussed the social issues caused by the food industry such as the increasing global population which will almost double the demand for meat production by 2050. The fact that one third of food produced does not actually get consumed also confounds the problem of food insecurity. Maple Leaf Foods has made it their mission to make steps towards solving these issues. They have two main reasons for their pursuit of sustainability. The first is that they are trying to create shared value. The second is that sustainability is ingrained in their corporate culture. Not only does their pursuit of sustainability serve the common good, it also gives them competitive advantages in their industry. However, Maple Leaf Foods cannot solve all of these issues on their own. All they can do is set the standard for the rest of the industry to follow.

About the Author

Graeson Bergen is a third-year student in the Business Administration program at Ambrose University. He will graduate in April 2021 and plans to work build a business career after that. Graeson can be contacted by email at GraesonBergen@gmail.com.

Endnotes

- ¹ Kuhn, L. (2018). Changing the way we do business [Conference Presentation]. *2018 Soul of the Next Economy Forum*. Calgary, AB: Ambrose University.
- ² See <https://www.mapleleaffoods.com/who-we-are/> and <https://www.mapleleaffoods.com/our-brands/>
- ³ Garnett, T. (2013). Food sustainability: Problems, perspectives and solutions. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 72(1), 29-39, p. 30.
- ⁴ Garnett, 2013, p.31.
- ⁵ Garnett, 2013, p.31.
- ⁶ Godfray, H. C., Beddington, J. R., Crute, I. R., Haddad, L., Lawrence, D., Muir, J. F.,... Toulmin, C. (2010, February 12). Food security: The challenge of feeding 9 Billion people. *Science*, 327(5967), 812-818. Retrieved from <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/327/5967/812.full>
- ⁷ Kuhn, 2018.
- ⁸ See <https://www.mapleleaffoods.com/>
- ⁹ See <https://www.feedopportunity.com/en/>
- ¹⁰ Retrieved from <https://www.isc.hbs.edu/creating-shared-value/Pages/default.aspx>
- ¹¹ See <https://www.mapleleaffoods.com/>
- ¹² Ahn, S.-Y., & Park, D.-J. (2018). Corporate social responsibility and corporate longevity: The mediating role of social capital and moral legitimacy in Korea. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 150(1), 117–134