

Saving the Environment

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There's a lot of hullabaloo going around about saving the environment, going green, lowering your carbon footprint, etc, etc. But why do I get the feeling that a lot of the people doing the shouting are doing so just because they have a soapbox to stand on? I believe many of them would be shouting whether the discussion was the environment or toothpaste.

There are so many things we could do, right now, to better our lives, reduce our cost of living, and benefit the environment but do we see action? Well, yes and no.

What do I mean by yes and no? Yes, there are people taking action. People and companies are inventing ways to improve our lives in many ways. Unfortunately, this also means pricing it out of the ballpark so only the higher-income consumers can afford them.

And no. While there are people taking action, for the most part it's not the RIGHT people. Sure, as a consumer you can do your part to reduce your carbon footprint. You can recycle, carpool, invest in different technologies to improve the economy of your home. While these things help you, in particular, they don't help the majority. Ok, the carpooling and recycling help the environment as a whole, but when are we going to see bigger players step up to the line and roll up their sleeves?

Unpractical? Not doable? I disagree completely. Take this, for example. I live in South Florida, where the sun shines most of the year. I live in a medium income neighborhood, and I even see the occasional solar panel dotting the roofs around my neighborhood. To heat swimming pools. We live in a climate that absolutely screams to be used to cultivate solar energy, but rely on our electric company to keep burning fuel to power us.

So sure, in a perfect world, we'd all get solar cells and be happy, yes? Well, it's not a perfect world. As with anything that is good for you, solar equipment can be quite expensive. So what do we do?

Well, let's think about this from the power company's perspective. Take FPL (Florida Power & Light), for example. Years ago I had the privilege of working on their traffic management system, a piece of software designed to optimize the shipping and receiving of goods. Now, the company I worked for didn't sell this software on the shelf for \$39, this was a software package that costs hundreds of thousands. It was during that project that I found out that FPL's bigger business was not selling electricity to home-owners, it was selling electricity to other states. They'd load up these huge batteries and ship them all over the country. Wild, eh?

Ok, I digress. Here we have FPL. Burning all of this fuel, creating greenhouse gases, maintaining this huge infrastructure, raising the cost of electricity, etc, etc. There has to be a better way. Well, how about this? Why doesn't FPL go into the financing business? Huh? Financing? Ok, maybe financing is the wrong word but listen to this. If FPL were to somehow SPONSOR their customers, arrange for them to have solar power installed into their homes, and then absorb the payments over time, many people would flock to the idea, wouldn't they?

Don't start shaking your head yet. There are companies out there now who are making solar roofing tiles. So this isn't like a big glass thing on your roof. Your WHOLE ROOF is a solar collector. Let's say that a typical roof costs \$15k (this number is completely out of my butt) to install solar tiles/shingles. And let's further say that in a locale like South Florida, with as near as we are to the equator, using these tiles takes care of 90% of our electric needs.

So, the typical electric bill would go from \$150 down to about \$20. Well, FPL could make an arrangement with the customer that they will subsidize the installation of the tiles, and roll the cost into the electric bill for the next, say, 15 years. So without being greedy and charging interest, it's about \$85 a month to pay for the solar tiles, plus the approximately \$20 that you need to pull from the grid. So your bill would immediately drop to about \$105 a month. And as a home owner, you get to look forward to the day in 15 years that your solar system is paid off, and you pay for only what you pull from the grid. Unless, of course, FPL gets intelligent and rolls a solar maintenance charge into the package for a few bucks a month, to maintain your setup.

Now, the question is, who really makes out in something like this? Well, the consumer obviously. They're getting a break in their electric bill immediately. Plus they know that just by having such a system, they are cutting down on their carbon footprint. If all of their neighbors get the system for their homes, there's less need for those high voltage power lines everywhere.

How about FPL, do they make out? Well, obviously they'd need to work some kind of deal with the solar tile manufacturers. But this kind of thing is a long term investment. Over time, instead of having these huge power stations pumping out power to all these substations and relay stations, we'd have several small distribution centers that store excess power sent to the grid, and re-distribute it as needed. If done right, FPL's whole business model may change from the creation and selling of electricity to the collection and redistribution of clean energy.

They could pay pennies on the dollar for excess electricity collected from the grids, in comparison to the fuel they're burning now. There would be no "single point of failure" like there is now. The huge plant goes out, and millions of people have no power. But over time, they've got cheap, clean energy and they don't even have to make it.

Sound simple? Well, maybe too simple. But it's not impossible. This is an example of how a REAL difference could be made.

But no. Everyone is too hung up on profit margins and rate increases to look beyond the fiscal year to the future. To what is best for the companies, for the population, and for the planet.