Many small business owners, facing one of the most challenging economic climates in recent memory, may be tempted to curtail or even suspend their company's charitable giving.

Ways to improve your bottom line

What kind of year has the first 6 months yielded for your business?

Has your place of business been producing efficiently?

I ask these questions because it is important to have your business run smoothly.

Many small business owners, facing one of the most challenging economic climates in recent memory, may be tempted to curtail or even suspend their company's charitable giving. After all, if a small business doesn't survive today, it can't very well give much in the way of charitable donations tomorrow.

But more and more small business owners are changing their thinking about charitable giving and coming to see it as not only a moral obligation but also a wise strategic investment in their

businesses' long-term future - a way to do be "doing well" while "doing good."

Looking for ways to improve your bottom line without much capital investment?

Then the first place you should look at carefully is your business' energy usage. Replace incandescent lights with fluorescent fixtures and your lighting energy operating and maintenance costs can decrease up to 75 percent, if you are mostly on incandescent now.

Less than 5 percent of energy used by incandescent lamps generates useful light so the rest is merely waste heat, which also increases summer air conditioning costs (if you are lucky enough to have this).

There are now many choices of fluorescent fixtures. Just because you already have fluorescents doesn't necessarily mean you have the most energy efficient ones. The larger diameter, old style T-12 tubes have inefficient magnetic ballasts while the newer (smaller diameter) T-8 tubes have energy efficient electronic ballasts, which have a longer life and are 30 percent more efficient than the old ones.

Also, many spaces are over lighted and you may be able to reduce the number of tubes per fixture by 50 percent with equivalent savings.

Some new T-8 tubes (those with green end caps) also have lower mercury content, which is clearly good for the environment we all live in. In those areas with screw in incandescent bulbs, compact fluorescents are now available in a variety of wattage choices, warmer lighting color, and some can be used with dimmers. Compacts last 8-10 times longer than incandescent lamps and use approximately 1/3 of the energy, and though they do cost significantly more initially, they pay off in the long run. Many hardware and lighting stores sell these at greatly reduced prices because of incentives.

Exit signs now come in LED versions, which can be retrofitted for about $30 per fixture. Since LED exit signs are estimated to last 220,000 hours, this pays back in only 3 months over an incandescent fixture and still makes sense to use in replacing burnt compact fluorescent

fixtures. If you still have any incandescent exit signs, this choice is a “no-brainer!”

The same goes for motion sensors in little used areas and photo cells on security lights, which can also be compact fluorescents for greater energy savings.

For businesses with refrigeration equipment, frequent cleaning of condenser coils (a very thin layer of dust reduces efficiency dramatically) and proper ventilation of compressor areas can save considerable money over time. For businesses with industrial equipment, Peak Shaving can really save big bucks! Many businesses are hit with an additional monthly demand charge, which represents the highest 15 minute period of peak usage.

One way to reduce your demand charge is to look into replacing larger electrical users like electric hot water heaters and clothes dryers with gas ones. This can pay back in as little as three months. Also, see if your utility bill has off peak hours that some use could be shifted to, perhaps by using timers. For manufacturers, Peak Shaving, or reducing this peak demand charge, can be accomplished by simply not turning on every piece of heavy electrical using equipment at once (usually first thing in the morning), and staggering this process. If you have high amperage equipment, and a demand charge, you should be doing Peak Shaving.

This brings us to the electric bill. Don’t just pay it without examining it and better yet, 4-6 months of bills or more, for patterns of heavy usage that could possibly be adjusted. There may be lots of energy saving dollars overlooked at nearly every business so why not take advantage of this at your business?

If your electric utility does not offer a free demand side management assessment, we can provide this overview assessment for you. Programmable, digital, set back thermostats can do the same for your heating and cooling bills. Why keep your business at 68 degrees when it’s empty?

I can hear my mother yelling at me now. Why you have those lights on and you’re not in the room? Or turn that television off if you are not watching it… my light bill is too high now.

At that time, I would be mad because I had to go back to my room and cut off the lights or TV that I had left on. But, little did I know, I would be confronted with the same issues once I started paying bills (smile).

Going Green is the newest term you hear being uses to save on energy. Going green is not just a trend spurred on by extreme environmentalist. The growing list of green products and increasing interest in the environment makes going green good business sense. People will shop according to their conscience and those who care about the environment are often willing to pay more for products that are environmentally sustainable.

It is not necessary to be an organic grocer or yoga instructor to run a green business. Businesses can become environmentally friendly by adopting a few simple techniques. Additionally, rather than increasing costs, many green business practices will actually help you save money in the long run.

Organic produce and green products managed to survive a recession.

This speaks volumes. There are people who want to protect the environment and choose environmentally friendly products whenever they are available. Retailers need to offer recycled, organic, and chemical-free merchandise, particularly in communities that are environmentally aware.

Printers should look for post-consumer recycled materials.

Restaurants and food purveyors have biodegradable food container options, and they can increase their quality by choosing local ingredients whenever possible.