Alumna Profile

Green Carpet Ride

One Bren alumna is working to transform an industry

Before Kim Matsoukas (MESM 2006) applied for a position as a sustainability coordinator at Los Angeles—based carpet manufacturer Bentley Prince Street, she wasn’t seeking to work for a corporation. “I had looked at a couple of other corporate positions,” she recalls, “but they were mainly in environmental health and safety regulations compliance,” which didn’t particularly interest her. The word “sustainability” in the job title at Bentley Prince Street, however, did.

She applied, and then discovered that the company was part of Interface, Inc., which she knew well. Interface was founded by Ray Anderson, who in the early 1990s became one of the first executives to make environmental responsibility a central mission of the company. With its Mission Zero promise to “eliminate any negative impact our company may have on the environment by the year 2020” and its measurable results in reducing, among other things, water and energy use, waste sent to landfill (by 95 percent), net greenhouse gas emissions (51 percent), Interface, says Matsoukas, “is the ultimate in corporate sustainability.” She was hired in June 2006 to work with Director of Sustainability and Supply Management Judy Pike.

“Prior to Kim, we had no one with an environmental degree,” says Pike, who earned her own environmental credentials on the job. “Now we realize that we will never again hire anyone to a similar position who doesn’t have an environmental education. She validated our sustainability focus and philosophy. And she brought passion, expertise, an understanding of where our company was, and the ability to explain environmental issues.”

Matsoukas describes herself as a resource for constituencies both inside and outside the company. She may work with internal associates to decide which of two boxes is better from a sustainability perspective, or whether they should use 100-percent recycled paper or 50-percent bamboo. She helps customers to compare products and understand how they can contribute to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for a project. And she is a resource for upper management, ensuring that sustainability remains part of any conversation about capital improvements.

Matsoukas has primary responsibility for a couple of different company efforts, including the ReEntry® reclamation program, which allows customers to return their carpet after its useful life to be repurposed, recycled, or, rarely, to fuel energy capture and conversion, in which non-recyclable carpet is incinerated and the resulting heat used to generate electricity. They also collect competitors’ carpet for reuse or recycling.

“It’s complicated,” Matsoukas says of the program, explaining that, because as many as five different companies may be involved in the sale and installation of carpet, getting the old carpet into the recycling-reuse loop takes a lot more than a phone call. “There are a lot of logistics involved, and it’s a behavior change. Carpet companies are generally family businesses that have been passed down through generations, and they’ve been putting used carpet in the trash for 30 years.” And while cost of shipping used carpet to the reprocessing facility in Georgia “is not inconsequential,” she adds, “it still costs a lot less than it does to extract new nylon from new oil.”

Matsoukas is often required to interpret science for non-scientists. That might involve linking a capital expenditure improvement project to financial and sustainability benefits, or explaining to the marketing department the environmental advantages of company products in a way that allows them to use the information to promote sales.

“I have to connect it to real life,” she says. “The challenge is to explain the value of a climate-neutral product to someone who has no idea what life-cycle assessment is. I have to make these things clear and make people care about them.”

Matsoukas does much of the internal quarterly reporting for EcoMetrics, a tool the company uses to measure its sustainability progress. The results are posted on the parent company’s website interfacesustainability.com. She also does the reporting for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Performance Track, a voluntary program in which companies set sustainability goals and publish results of their audits as a transparent way of determining their progress. And she leads the annual carbon inventory the company conducts as a member of the California Climate Action Registry.

continued on page 16
Since arriving at Bentley Prince Street, Matsoukas, now the sustainability manager, has also served as project manager for the company’s successful effort to earn LEED Silver certification from the U.S. Green Building Council for their manufacturing facility. At the 2007 UN climate conference in Bali, she spoke on the topic of energy efficiency and how a publicly owned company in a country with no federal climate policy had taken on reducing its carbon footprint.

"Bren prepared me very well for the professional world," she says. “I learned the complexity of the issues and where to look for information.” Matsoukas can never be sure how, which element of, or in what context her Bren education will prove valuable. A finance class, which, she recalls, “seemed a complete waste of my time while I was taking it,” has proven invaluable. Law, too, has been useful, particularly in helping customers to understand the value of the company’s sustainability work in the context of policy and regulations.

“For instance,” she says, “we’re a California carpet manufacturer, one of only four in the nation that are not in Georgia. The way the Clean Air Act works is that the more impacted your area is – that is, the farther your local air quality is from meeting regulations (and L.A. is an extreme ‘non-attainment’ zone, far from compliance), the tighter the controls. So the AQMD [Air Quality Management District] has more stringent regulations for us than for mills in Georgia. That’s something most customers don’t understand. They may think that recycling alone makes something sustainable. I want them to understand that having a green product is also about how it’s made. My job is to help them think about it a little deeper. Once they understand that we can’t emit more than X amount of VOCs [volatile organic compounds] while mills in Georgia don’t even have to monitor theirs, they see the value. It’s a market advantage for us.

“The number of customers who care about sustainability is growing,” she continues. “We now have customers for whom the sustainability of our manufacturing process is a primary element in their purchasing decision.”

Listening to Judy Pike, it’s clear that Matsoukas has tremendous value to the company. “We knew almost immediately that Kim was exactly the person we were looking for,” says Pike. “She was on her feet running the moment she came in here, and everyone knows that she is the educated environmentalist.”