

THE LAST PLASTIC STRAW

Purpose-Driven Success

Certified B Corporations solidify their commitment to sustainability and social responsibility

By Robin Roenker



The team at Minneapolis-based Peace Coffee had always made roasting and selling certified organic and fair trade coffees fundamental to their mission. But when it came time to look for ways to further their commitment to “the highest social and ethical standards,” they knew pursuing Certified B Corporation status was



the next logical step, says Anne Costello, the company’s director of coffee.

With more than 3,100 companies certified across 150 industries and 71 countries, the B Corporation designation has become a recognized international standard for evaluating companies’ social and environmental performance.

Since its launch in 2007 by B Lab—a nonprofit with headquarters in Berwyn, Pennsylvania, that, in its own words, “serves a global movement of people using business as a force for good”—the initiative’s distinctive Certified B Corporation, or B Corp, logo has become a trusted, go-to means for companies to quickly convey their commitment to balancing profit with a purpose.

A Holistic Approach

While other certification programs may focus solely on a business’s sourcing strategies or environmental impact, the B Corp certification process assesses all aspects of a company’s logistical operations, including to its relationships with employees, the environment, and the broader community.

“You cannot succeed in B Corp unless your mission takes a holistic approach to doing good,” says Costello. “So, it’s not just that you have awesome supply chain practices. You also have to look at your employee benefits, training, and engagement.”

B Corp certification carries such stature because it signifies that a business “is not just mission-oriented, but that [its] mission to do good is really broad,” adds Costello.

Ben Anderson, executive director for B Lab U.S./Canada, agrees: “The thing that differentiates B Corp from other certifications is that it is holistic and measures across [a company’s] business, social, environmental, worker governance, and customer practices.”

Still, Anderson is quick to note that B Corp certification operates in tandem with other industry certification programs and that, moreover, those other certifications often play a central role in helping companies meet the standards for becoming B Corp certified.

“We would be the first to acknowledge that our certification rests on the shoulders of other certifiers, which in the coffee and tea industry would include fair trade, organic, or non-GMO,” he says. “All of those certifications are critical to go deep into the practices of the company. Our approach is to roll those up into other holistic measures that we implement. . . . What B Corp certification does is help bring a company’s intentions into practice and policy.”

The Certification Process

Companies who wish to begin the B Corp certification process can research requirements at BCorporation.net/Certification. The first step to becoming B Corp certified is to complete the free, online B Impact Assessment (BIA) at BImpactAssessment.net. Companies must score at least an 80 (out of a possible score of 200) on the assessment to become certified, and they must complete the process for recertification every three years.

BIA scores are verified via supporting documentation, such as utility usage records, payroll information, and more, that companies are required to submit, as well as through follow-up phone calls with B Lab representatives. (B Lab offers multiple versions of the BIA, allowing businesses to complete an online questionnaire that’s tailored to their size and industry sector.)

Though it may sound intimidating at first, the scale for earning points is readily available online, once a company begins the BIA process.

“Within the assessment, there’s a resource center that helps you determine how to accomplish that goal [of reaching 80 points],” says Anderson. “So, if a company is at 65 points and they need to get to 80, they could see, ‘Oh, we could raise our lowest-paid employee to a living wage, or we could offer paid volunteer time.’ All the scoring is totally transparent, so as a company, you can kind of make a list of ‘Here’s how we can improve, and here’s where our next 15 points could come from.’ »

While the B Lab website estimates that completing the BIA online might take as little as one to three hours to get a rough baseline score, Costello recommends allocating several months for information gathering.

“No one person on staff is likely to hold the answers to all the questions on the assessment, because it is so intensive,” says Costello. “Each time we’ve been through the assessment, it’s taken probably two to three months to complete.”

The BIA includes “hundreds of questions and requires a lot of documentation,” says Devorah Freudiger, director of coffee culture at California-based Equator Coffees, which has been B Corp certified since 2011.

BIA questions “entail everything from your policy around sustainability in your office—Do you have energy efficient facilities? How do you treat waste?—to how you treat your employees—Do they have paid time to do nonprofit work? What are your maternity and paternity leave policies?” explains Alfonso Carmona, chief marketing officer at Sustainable Harvest, a specialty-grade coffee importer based in Portland, Oregon, which has been a Certified B Corp since 2008.

But while the certification process can be intensive, Freudiger says it’s well worth the effort, stating that maintaining B Corp certification offers “a way to really quantify our impact and to hold ourselves accountable.”

Further, having a publicly available baseline score on the BIA—and a goal of improving it when it comes time to recertify—helps everyone at Equator stay on the same page in their decision-making.

“It helps us all move with the same intention, making choices that are environmentally, socially, and economically responsible,” says Freudiger.

Built-In Partnerships

Another advantage of becoming B Corp certified: membership in the growing, worldwide B Corp community and the ready-made network



of like-minded, mission-oriented partners it provides.

When Equator recently needed to source vendors for reusable tumblers to sell in its cafés, it turned to MiiR, a fellow B Corp.

“Rather than research a [another vendor’s] supply chain going back to China, we were able to partner with MiiR, another B Corp and say, ‘We trust this supply line and know it’s going to be best in class,’” says Freudiger.

Early next year, Equator Coffees will team with importing partner Sustainable Harvest to unveil a limited-edition collection of coffee from Datterra, a Certified B Corp coffee farm in Brazil.

“It will be a fully B Corp certified supply chain, from producer to point-of-sale,” says Sustainable Harvest’s Carmona. “It’s really exciting to have partners at every level committed to sustainability.”

To mark the partnership, Equator is planning a special, month-long roll-out of eight Datterra coffees in February. Throughout the month, staff there will be equipped with marketing materials and prepared messaging points to answer customers’ questions about what B Corps are and what certification means. Equator also plans to release videos from its visit to Datterra’s farm on social media and in an email campaign.

“By partnering with other B Corps and having them talk about the partnership, too, I’m hoping we can sort of amplify our voices a little bit,” says Ashley Kasten, brand marketing manager for Equator Coffees.

“We realized we could use the partnership to build even more awareness about B Corp certification and its benefits,” adds Ted Stachura, Equator’s director of coffee.

For its part, Datterra is proud to have found in B Corp certification another means of quantifying the company’s commitment to growing coffee as sustainably as possible. Datterra was first B Corp certified in 2016 and has been honored as one of B Labs’ “Best of the World Honorees” for the Environment, an honor given to B Corps scoring in the top 10 percent on the BIA in a given sector, for the past three years running.

“When I learned about B Corp certification, I thought, this is the answer we’ve been looking for. We already were Rainforest Alliance Certified and felt we needed to do more. I knew immediately [becoming a B Corp] was what we needed to do,” says Isabela Paschoal, Datterra’s sustainability director, whose father originally established the farm with environmental sustainability as its driving mission. “We want to use B Corp certification to be part of the movement to develop a better world.”

For companies still considering whether or not to pursue B Corp certification, B Lab’s Anderson says there’s never been a better time than now.

As more and more businesses across the globe are joining in the B Corp movement, the initiative has finally “reached a critical mass,” he says. “It has evolved from something small and niche to something that can help all businesses globally advance toward a more shared and durable prosperity.” 