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Spring business conference a valuable experience



Four years ago at the first Sustainable Connections business conference, I read poster after poster that 100-plus local entrepreneurs had taped on the walls of Broadway Hall during a networking exercise led by Gifford Pinchot III, founder of the Bainbridge Graduate

Institute. Somewhere I still have the posters each attendee created, deep in a file cabinet in my office; folded up, pushed away — nearly forgotten.

There were a lot of names and ideas for creating new businesses I wasn't familiar with, (Fiamma Burger? Hmmm ...) and new ideas for businesses I knew: Whidbey Island Bank, Ryzex Group, and Wild Catch, among others. Still, there was one poster for a business I found particularly humorous: "The Nameless Marketplace." Now known as the Bellingham Public Market, it has become my favorite place for a quick working lunch. (Way to go, guys!)

But what sticks with me most about that first conference is how incredibly delighted everyone was to find themselves among their peers. Business owners, employees, organizational directors, government representatives, people with a startup idea — all were thrilled to find like-minded entrepreneurs who cared about the "Triple Bottom Line" of people, planet, and profit in their business. Now in its fifth year, the Sustainable Connections conference continues to inspire local innovators and helps build the number and prosperity of local businesses creatively addressing environmental and societal challenges. It is also now the largest business conference north of Seattle — 'green' or otherwise — with more than 300 attendees projected to attend this year on May 15.

Arran Stephens, CEO of Nature's Path Foods, will join us as our keynote speaker and share the story of how his company has grown from a small family farm in Canada to North America's largest manufacturer of certified organic cereals, resulting in more than \$150 million in annual sales. Says Stephens, "The importance of green values in our business is as important as the people and family behind the business."

We'll also welcome Kevin Wilhelm, CEO of Sustainable Business Consulting, a Seattle-based firm focused on improving profits through the use of sustainable business practices. Kevin is an advisor to the Corporate Climate Protection

a carbon footprint analysis and highlight the business benefits that can be realized by doing so.

Additional highlights of the day will include:

Communication strategists from the Metropolitan Group, a national leader in “Marketing that Matters,” explaining how green and socially responsible businesses can effectively tell their company’s “story,” and live the brand inside the organization.

Jil Zilligen, co-founder and chief sustainability officer at Nau, a new Portland-based apparel company that uses innovative fabrics to blend beauty, sustainability and performance, talking about “Creating a different model for doing business.”

Details on a burgeoning national movement to create “Green Collar Jobs,” which meld efforts to reduce poverty while addressing environmental challenges. Hear from and give input to a panel of state and local partners including Climate Solutions, Bellingham Technical College, AWISH, Opportunity Council and Sustainable Connections, who are working on bringing these opportunities to Bellingham.

Bellingham Mayor Dan Pike joining us for an interactive dialogue about the sustainable economic development opportunities in this community, and his commitment to making Bellingham the greenest community and economy in North America.

A few years after that first Sustainable Connections conference I caught Buck Gibbons of Wild Catch sharing part of his marketing strategy at a business forum in Seattle. It was incredibly moving to recall the Peer Mentoring session he’d participated in back in May 2004 as a younger business at our first conference, and see how he’d used the feedback from that session to strengthen his business model. There, among successful businesses from across the state, I realized what a uniquely caring and engaged community of businesses makes up Sustainable Connections.

As a resource for sustainability to those businesses I am often asked, “I’m in the [insert industry here] business — how can I be sustainable?” And I direct them to our online resource center at www.sconnect.org, talk about the importance of Green Power and the Watershed Pledge, and how to get involved with our new “Toward Zero Waste” campaign in 2008. Yet more important than any one answer is simply asking the question and beginning the journey. The answer is long and rewarding, and a willingness to inquire is the first step on the path toward sustainability.

The 5th annual Spring Business Conference & Expo is on May 15. For info and to register, visit www.sconnect.org.

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