

Heroes of zero **Businesses that don't waste win**



Paper or plastic? When it comes to recycling office waste many local companies are expanding their list of recyclables.

By Maria McLeod

Fifty years ago Whatcom County's commercial and residential trash was dumped into Bellingham Bay. Or if not dumped into open waters, trash was burned on people's private property or left to rot in heaps.

Progress, in the form of open landfills, arrived in the early '70s. These garbage pits resulted in toxic gases and liquids leaching into the earth and/or episodes of spontaneous combustion and fires. With new legislation, and new governmental agencies, came better engineered and better controlled landfills in fewer locations throughout the state. Today, most of the area's trash is hauled to landfills in southern Washington and Oregon. However, area businesses now are doing something that could one day change that practice as well. They're moving toward zero waste.

Reducing the Waste Stream

Spearheading the 2008 "Toward Zero Waste" campaign is Sustainable Connections, a membership-based nonprofit business organization that is especially skilled at harnessing the environmental consciousness of the business community it serves. From their cheery orange, yellow and green-walled offices on the third floor of the downtown Bellingham Towers building, an upbeat staff provides support and resources for a membership with a mission. Sustainable Business Development Manager Cathy Lehman advises the more than 100 Sustainable Connection members who've signed on to reduce waste and increase recycling as part of the campaign. The Toward Zero Waste campaign kicked off on April 19, 2008, and will continue into early 2009.

Regarding the seemingly monumental challenge of significant waste reduction, Lehman is undaunted, "Waste is something we created, and we can uncreate it," she said. Locally, Sustainable Connections has 600 members from Whatcom, Skagit and Island counties,

but they offer consultation globally through their SC Consulting Division. In 2007, Sustainable Connections executed its Green Power Campaign, led by the organization's Executive Director Michelle Long, which landed Bellingham on the national map with an Environmental Protection Agency award of recognition as the No. 1 Green Power Community in the United States. Thirty-five of the 100-plus businesses who have joined the Toward Zero Waste campaign to date are what Sustainable Connections refers to as the TZW "Pioneers." Those are business who have committed to lead by example and have already reduced their waste stream by 80 percent. Campaign "partners" include participating businesses who signed on to commit their businesses to a 50 percent waste reduction by January 2009. In exchange, participating members receive promotional materials related to their waste reduction as well as technical support in tracking their efforts.



Ryzex has built a company culture around recycling – and it's fun!

Reducing Waste the Ryzex Way

A shining example of waste reduction and recycling success is one of the Toward Zero Waste campaign pioneers, the Ryzex Group. Headquartered in Bellingham, Ryzex is a privately owned electronics recycling company with facilities in Tennessee, Arizona, Canada, France and the UK. The company sells and rents recycled and refurbished electronic barcode and automated data collection devices as well as other wireless electronics to customers around the world – a venture that has proven increasingly successful since the company's formation in 1989. In 2007 Ryzex's revenue was \$72 million with 6,000 customers worldwide. The company, which was founded in 1989, is led by Australian-born ecopreneur Rud Browne, CEO. Browne is both a passionate advocate for the environment and a savvy industrialist. According to Browne, whose company's profitability is driven by resale of electronics that have been diverted from the landfill, these roles are entirely compatible. And success comes from understanding and addressing a very simple principle.

"Waste, in any form, costs a business money," Browne said. "With anything you put in a dumpster, you're creating a problem that someone else will have to deal with, and they're going to charge you to deal with it."

In 2005, Browne decided to take Ryzex not in a new direction, but one complementary to the work they've been doing with electronics. They set a goal to reduce waste production to zero. In one year's time, the Bellingham facility with 140 employees went from filling one 45-cubic-yard Dumpster per month to filling just one 90-gallon tote. Browne estimates that his business currently recycles 95-98 percent of its waste at the Bellingham facility, or approximately 250,000 pounds per year.



Offices in Whatcom County can now participate in the FoodPlus! recycling program through Sanitary Service Co.

Raising the Lid on Recycling

It was businesses like Ryzex and Whatcom County's Sanitary Services Co. (SSC), that Lehman and her Sustainable Connections colleagues went to, seeking advice, before deciding to launch their newest campaign.

"We asked, 'Is it possible to achieve zero waste? Can we ask people do this? Can we really achieve it?'" Lehman said.

In response, they learned that waste reduction of 80 percent was not only profitable, but that it was an attainable goal.

"That was the biggest reason we started focusing on this," Lehman said. "Because it was just sitting there in front of us, like, 'Look at me. We can do this.'"

Several factors have made the seemingly lofty idea an achievable goal. In March 2008 SSC – the largest contractor for recycling and trash collection services in Whatcom County (with more than 40,000 customers) – was able to add to their recycling services by increasing the varieties of plastic they could transport to recycling facilities. A few years prior to that, in June of 2005, SSC began their FoodPlus! program for residents. Shortly thereafter they added FoodPlus! for commercial use.

The composting/recycling service provides businesses and residents with a separate 60-gallon green tote with yellow FoodPlus! stickers, distinguishing it from the regular bins. Food scraps, food-related paper products, and yard debris are collected and sent to local composting facility Green Earth Technologies, located in Lynden. In compost heaps that reach between 175-180 degrees, paper products and food waste decompose and turn into rich soil amendments. For commercial use, a 60-gallon FoodPlus! tote costs \$7.75 per month for weekly emptying, if necessary, while a same-size trash container costs \$15.24 per month for weekly pick up.

Avoid Costs, Stay Sustainable

At the head of the mission to keep trash out of the landfill and find appropriate recycling alternatives is one of the campaign's central figures – the easy-going and knowledgeable area waste expert, Rodd Pemble.

Pemble is the recycling manager for SSC. He also is chairman of the Solid Waste Advisory Committee for Whatcom County. For businesses participating in the Toward Zero Waste campaign, Pemble is their first stop after signing up with Sustainable Connections. He offers a free waste audit and baseline assessment. Once on site, Pemble assesses the way waste materials move through a business, identifying where to add waste collection receptacles. He peeks in garbage cans and Dumpsters, making note of recyclable materials that have found their way into the trash, taking up valuable volume, such as paper towels. As is typical of the waste management business, SSC charges customers for trash pick-up by volume, not weight. Even with his 17 years of experience and cumulative knowledge, Pemble tends not to tell businesses what to do as much as he explains their options and allows them to prioritize. Unless, of course, he's able to see a quick fix with immediate cost benefits – as with a 90-gallon trash pick-up tote full of paper towels that could easily be composted instead of sent to the landfill.

"We look at it as, sure, we want to provide services, but we want to provide services to businesses that are going to be here over the long haul," Pemble said. "The more successful they are, the more likely they are to be a customer 10, 15, 25 years from now. And because we helped them be as sustainable as they could, the local economy is more sustainable."

According to Pemble, the current TZW campaign and accompanying promotional efforts have increased requests for waste assessments five times over normal. An educator by training, Pemble has been analyzing waste disposal and recycling practices since 1991, and he's been with SSC since 1996. He's been happy with not only the changes in the industry – which include an increase in the post-consumer waste market, allowing for more recycling – but also the shift in attitude among SSC's current and potential customers.

"Fifteen years ago people in business might have been clueless about what was recyclable," Pemble said. "They didn't even know what was in their garbage."

Now, reports Pemble, people might not always know what to do, but they're at least interested in looking for options. Also, overall trash pick-up has decreased for both businesses and residents in the portion of Whatcom County SSC covers. For example, from 2006 to 2007, the tons of commercial waste they pick up in the city of Bellingham alone decreased by almost 400 tons.

Painting the Office Green

Like Ryzex and the other campaign pioneers, Computer Source of Burlington strives to be an environmental leader, not only in relationship to their immediate products and services, but in establishing a culture of environmental consciousness at their workplace, which includes 14 employees.

Pamela Santangelo serves as Computer Source's vice president and special projects manager. She has worked with her husband Adrian Santangelo, president of the company, to create strict in-house recycling guidelines. Last year their business voluntarily recycled more than 40 tons of e-waste, keeping some of the world's most toxic trash out of the waste stream. Also, they try to operate a paperless business, using face-to-face communication, e-mail, and phones instead of fax machines and printed memos. They've increased the use of mobile devices to streamline office efficiency and support their paperless business. They recycle packing materials as well as request upstream vendors to change their packaging to include cornstarch packing peanuts. Also, they offer their employees a kitchen supplied with real plates, cups, silverware (and food). Sometimes they even grow fresh herbs. Pamela Santangelo explains that having food available for preparation at the office reduces the need for food packaging waste when they or their employees bring food from home.

"We took the attitude in the company, and with all of our staff, that if it can be recycled it is recycled," said Santangelo. "If the management and the owners in a company have the attitude that choosing to recycle something over throwing it in the trash is important, it will follow through to the employees as well."

In addition to recycling e-waste, Computer Source services include building new systems, repairing existing systems and managing IT needs for businesses of all kinds. They are especially skilled at removing spyware and malware and can provide solutions for a number of network and individual user security and privacy issues. They also refurbish cast-off computers and donate them to charities in need. Their charges for recycling are modest and free if the customer is buying a new system.

Green Purchasing Power

In addition to becoming avid recyclers, businesses of all kinds have begun making purchasing changes that facilitate waste reduction. As an example, Pemble cites Western Washington University as well as Bellingham, Meridian, and Mount Baker school districts.

"Bellingham schools – from the middle school down – have pretty much eliminated the use of Styrofoam, which is one of the few materials that we do not have a local (recycling) option for," Pemble said.

In circumstances where the school district had formerly used Styrofoam, they now use paper products. Although more expensive for the district to buy than Styrofoam, paper products are transformed into compost through their "Food to Flowers" program (similar to FoodPlus! composting) eliminating the presence of food containers, disposable plates and cups in the trash. That saves hauling costs.

"That way, when the kids finish with lunch, they shouldn't have any garbage left on their lunch tray," Pemble said. "Where before you had a Styrofoam plate, a Styrofoam bowl, a Styrofoam fry boat, and all had to go into the garbage."

"Upstream" requests are increasingly taking place, with businesses asking providers to alter packaging.

Ecological and Economical

Browne of Ryzex is a strong advocate for both upstream and downstream waste reduction. As an example of the kind of financial win-wins that exist for businesses, Browne described a dilemma recently faced by a friend who owned a business in Hawaii. His friend was bothered by the cost of hauling his waste – most of it derived from packaging. Realizing that most shipping containers returned to the mainland empty, Browne's friend decided to talk to the person selling him the goods and ask if he might like to have his packaging back in order to reuse it, saving both business owners money. The answer was "yes."

"My friend has probably reduced his waste stream by 50-80 percent overnight, without any

sacrifice,” Browne said. “In fact, it’s a positive. He’s making money out of it because he’s not paying dumping fees.”

In addition to looking upstream, businesses like Ryzex have begun looking downstream as well, taking responsibility for the end of the line even after it leaves their facility.

“If you really want to do this properly, you need to think about the whole reverse supply chain,”

Browne said. “Who is going to do what with it when you pass it on, and are you continuing to be part of the solution, or are you just making yourself feel good by perpetuating a problem?”

At Sustainable Connections, they have set the momentum. The Toward Zero Waste campaign is sponsored by Whatcom County, the City of Bellingham, Washington State Department of Ecology, The Russell Family Foundation and Sanitary Service Co.

And although the campaign is only six months along, with at least another six to go and businesses still signing on, they have already begun to step back and look at the larger, brighter picture that made their Green Power campaign such a success.

“We can create a model for other communities,” Lehman said. “And we have the capacity to do that. We have the business leadership to really get this going and show other businesses, maybe larger businesses, what’s possible. And that’s why we’re tackling waste.”.