

## Local companies reduce waste and save

Profits to be found in waste reduction and recycling



Sanitary Service Company recycling manager Rodd Pemble watches Cascade Cuts Nursery owner Alison Kutz-Troutman explain the business' on-site composter during a waste audit at the nursery on April 8.

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Imagine hundreds of dollars bulging from the top of the garbage can.

The pile grows larger and larger but no one seems to notice. Then these dollars are bagged up, but instead of taking them to the bank — they go straight to the landfill.

In 2006, U.S. residents, businesses, and institutions produced more than 251 million tons of municipal solid waste, which is approximately 4.6 pounds of waste per person per day, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

But it's a different world today than it was in the 1960s when it comes to recycling that waste. Back then, only 6.4 percent of people recycled, diverting 5.6 million tons of solid waste from the landfill. But as of 2006, 32.5 percent of the United States population recycles, diverting more than 81 million tons of solid waste, according to the EPA.

Lately, the nation is riding a green wave of environmentalist sentiment, partially fueled by a desire for national energy independence and concerns about global warming, and some businesses are cashing in. More and more, businesses are finding that waste reduction and recycling increase profits by saving on the costs of waste disposal, handling, and treatment, and on the purchase of raw materials.

And green practices mean opportunities for green marketing, which can attract a whole new consumer base.. Increasingly, consumer decisions are based upon which products and services have the least impact on the environment.

"I hear some people say they can't afford to make these types of changes when, in reality, they can't afford not to," said Rodd Pemble, recycling manager for Sanitary Service Company (SSC).

Pemble said that garbage costs are based on landfill costs, which have reached \$85 a ton in Whatcom County because there are no nearby landfills. Compare this to states like Alabama, which has several landfills that charge \$10 a ton.

For most business owners, Pemble said, it really comes down to avoiding certain costs. He said it just doesn't pay to throw stuff away when there are so many opportunities to save money through recycling.

"It's my job to find those opportunities," he said.

## **Digging through the garbage**

Pemble, who is also SSC's waste auditor, said businesses interested in waste reduction call SSC to request a free waste audit and educational visit. Pemble, who has been doing this job for more than a decade, schedules an appointment to tour the business and pick through their garbage as they pick his brain for ways to reduce waste that would work best for them.

On April 8, he visited Cascade Cuts Nursery, a local plant wholesaler. The nursery's owners, Paul and Alison Kutz-Troutman, attended the meeting along with greenhouse grower and Cascade Cuts official "garbage cop," Grace Winberg.

Pemble went down a checklist with them, marking off materials as went along. Plastics, piping, food, cardboard — Pemble quickly determined what the company was already doing to reduce waste. He then identified key materials that the company used in high volume but may have been unaware they could recycle, such as latex gloves.

"They come from a tree," Pemble said.

The owners and Winberg were visibly overjoyed.

"This is really exciting," Winberg said. "I was really worried about the latex gloves because we go through so many of them."

In fact, Paul Troutman said that because each employee uses and discards approximately four pairs of latex gloves a day, it was easily the most exciting discovery of the meeting.

Troutman said Cascade Cuts took a lot from its meeting with Pemble and they would be ordering a FoodPlus! tote from SSC in order to decrease their food waste and recycle the gloves. He also said they plan to focus on some on-site composting and reusing old soil.

"(Waste reduction) is just the right thing to do," Troutman said. "We used to drive a bunch of our plastics down to Mount Vernon, and we had to pay dumping fees, but it was the right thing to do for the planet. If it costs us a little bit more then it was money well spent."

## **Working toward zero waste**

Cascade Cuts is doing more than just the audit to change their waste practices. The company has also joined with Sustainable Connections and nearly 100 other local businesses in the Toward Zero Waste campaign. Each of those businesses has pledged to reduce their waste 50 percent by 2009. Cascade Cuts will join the campaign at "Pioneer" status, an honor reserved for businesses that have less than 20 percent landfill waste.

Cathy Lehman, sustainable business development manager for Sustainable Connections, said a 50-percent waste reduction could mean very different things for different businesses.

"Folks are at such different places along the path; some are just getting started and others have been working at reducing waste for a while," Lehman said.

Lehman said she admires individuals in the community that use their business as a vehicle for making positive change in the world, as well as provide a product or service.

"Since somebody is going to make their product or provide their service, they might as well be the best business possible," Lehman said.

David Killian, co-owner of Colophon Café, a founding partner of the Toward Zero Waste initiative, said the café has been reducing waste where possible for a long time and has reduced their solid waste by 85 percent.

"They say the first 80 percent is the easiest; it's that last 20 percent that is more of a challenge," Killian said.

Colophon has been recycling paper, tin and bottles since it opened in 1985.

"We were recycling before recycling was cool," Killian said.

The café also tried to maintain its own compost pile, but it became too messy and too much work for the business' employees.

Thankfully, Killian said, SSC started its FoodPlus! curbside composting program, which allowed the café to make a permanent waste reduction.

Killian said generally it is easy to recycle but it is difficult to be conscientious about waste when making initial purchases.

For example, the café found that the foil butter pads they used were not recyclable, so Colophon no longer purchases it, which reduces waste generation.

“I think this program is really progressive and will make the community even more conscientious about their waste.”

### **Appreciation in the ranks**

Perhaps it seems business is fine and there are no immediate needs to change. Or there may be concern that changing employee habits could rock the boat and that making four different stops just to take out the garbage could push a disgruntled employee over the edge.

Pemble said he thinks many employers underestimate their employees and often feel workers would respond unfavorably to waste reduction efforts that could add to their workload.

“In fact, I often see that employee say, ‘It’s about time.’” he said.

Leah Peterson, Colophon’s wait- staff manager and “sustainability director,” said the employee response to the business’ work with Sustainable Connections has been overwhelmingly positive.

“I think the incentive is in the program. People in the community are talking about it and it distinguishes us from other businesses,” Peterson said. “It’s a cool thing to do.”