



## It's good to be green

Companies see importance in helping environment, improving corporate image

By Robert Miller Staff Writer

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A few years ago, Don Droppo Jr. had a suggestion: Why not power his family's company with renewable sources of power, like wind, solar and geothermal?

His father, Don Droppo Sr., the CEO and president of Curtis Packaging Corp. in Newtown, answered back in blunt, astonished disbelief.

Then, after listening more to the idea, he agreed it made sense.

"He really opened my eyes," Droppo said of his son's ideas. "I thought if we're going to do something, let's do it right.

"Why just do 20 percent renewable energy?," he asked. "Let's do 100 percent."

Today, Curtis is about as green as it can be without buying a fleet of Priuses for its staff. It's instituted a series of programs that, over the past five years, has changed the way it does business.

The company uses 100 percent renewable energy.

It's redone its lighting system and company technology to maximize energy efficiency.

It's been certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council for using paper made by companies with good forestry practices.

And it's been honored by Connecticut Gov. M. Jodi Rell and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Curtis now recycles as much of its waste paper as it can, and it uses recycled paper for its packaging when possible.

It's the first packaging company in North America to become carbon neutral. After doing a complete carbon assessment, and eliminating as much of its greenhouse emissions as it could, the company decided to buy carbon credits by supporting the replanting of five acres of rain forest in Costa Rica, as well as a forest project in Wales and a methane recapturing project in Germany.

The result of all these good works?

"It's been huge," said Droppo Jr., Curtis's vice president of marketing.

"We've had phone calls from Fortune 500 companies that we'd never been able to consider in the past," his father added.

That's because as companies across the country go green, they want green packaging -- people buying organic breakfast cereal want to know

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the box that holds the cereal is made from recycled cardboard. Curtis can provide that, while still making high-quality merchandise

In the past few years, companies throughout the state and the country are coming to the same realization: Going green is good for the environment and good for corporate reputation.

But it's also good business -- every dollar not spent on lighting or heating or waste disposal is a dollar earned.

"They realize the ecological advantages," said Judy Wlodarczyk, an environmental management specialist with CONNSTEP, Connecticut State Technology Extension Program.

"But it also goes to the bottom line," she noted. "It goes to their pocket."

Wlodarczyk works with CONNSTEP's Clean Manufacturing program, which works with businesses to reduce their energy use and to become more environmentally savvy.

Wlodarczyk said this work takes a commitment to change. Sometimes, she said, it means standing back and looking at a company's work as a whole.

"You have to start from the beginning," she said. "But I know companies that are saying, 'We produce a lot of waste and it's costing us a lot to recycle.' You need to look at what you use and find ways to reduce it."

This change in philosophy is already happening at big companies, she said. Some of this may have to do with public relations and with the desire to cut costs.

"But it's also the right thing to do," she said.

And that corporate philosophy matters. The Droppos at Curtis Packaging said their company's work at being out front of the competition, environmentally, makes for a workforce that's proud to be employed at Curtis. And it also means they can get the cream of the next crop of workers.

"I do a lot of college recruitment," Don Droppo Jr. said. "One of the best things we can talk about is being an environmentally friendly company."

"The kids in college today have grown up with Earth Day," he observed. "They want to work for a company that's good, environmentally."

Some companies, like Curtis, have increased their sales by selling their wares to companies that are going green.

Others, like FuelCell Energy in Danbury -- which makes fuel cells to provide power to institutions and commercial buildings -- are part of the technological revolution at the root of these changes. Its business is also on the upswing.

"We're seeing our backlog of orders grow, we're seeing our revenues grow," said Dan Brdar, the company's president and CEO.

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"A lot of that growth is in California right now," Brdar related. "But that's OK. A lot of these things get established in California, then move east."

FuelCell Energy sells to companies that want an environmentally sound, non-polluting power source. But with the price of energy up sharply, many companies are deciding they'd rather pay up front, install units on their premises, then go off the grid and have their own private source of power.

"Companies want stability -- they want to know what their energy costs will be years down the road," Brdar said.

"Sharp Electronics is one of the biggest producers of wide-screen TVs," he said. "They just installed solar panels in their headquarters in Japan to provide power during peak hours, and a fuel cell from us to provide their base power."

Companies can make these upfront investments. Getting individuals to do so can be harder.

Stephen Lasar, a New Milford architect who has been designing passive solar homes since the 1970s, said there are excellent green technologies available on the small scale. But it takes some investment.

"Geothermal heating and cooling is very efficient, but it's also expensive," Lasar said. "Putting solar panels on the rooftops is good, and there are now tax rebates that reduce that expense. If you can't do those things, you can use

natural gas which is less polluting than oil."

Lasar said, however, many of these new systems -- expensive enough on a new house -- can be prohibitively costly when you try to retrofit them onto an older place.

"There are a lot of different strategies you can use," he explained. "But you also have to sort out what's fashionably green from what's really green."

With all these caveats, Lasar said, he's getting more inquiries than ever about building green houses.

"People care about sustainability," he said.

And sometimes, it brings things back to where they started.

Don Droppo Sr. points out that originally, Curtis Packaging was a comb and button shop that began in 1845. It was powered by a water wheel -- a renewable source of power.

"I've always asked, 'what can we do to make Curtis a better company,' " he said. "The changes we're making now have made us into a better company. Our customers want to do business with a company that's pro-active on the environment."

"We're helping our bottom line," Don Droppo Jr. said. "We're helping our community. We're helping the Earth."

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