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## Riding the Green Wave

By - 5/26/2008

Across Florida, small business owners are joining the green bandwagon by recycling, reducing water and energy consumption, and controlling waste. Some are revamping their business practices to comply with new conservation-minded regulatory mandates. Others are proudly positioning themselves as the green alternative, waving the Save-the-Earth banner to distinguish themselves within a crowded marketplace. While there is no precise definition or industry classification for "green business," here's how a few Florida businesses are going green.

Pizza Fusion - *Fort Lauderdale*

Pizza Fusion CEO Vaughn Lazar (from left), COO Michael Gordon and Vice President for Franchise Development Randy Romano integrate green products into every aspect of their business. [Photo: Eileen Escarda]

It could be the perfect Gen-X mantra: "Saving the Earth, one pizza at a time."

That's both company slogan of Fort Lauderdale-based Pizza Fusion and the personal philosophy of 30-something co-founders Vaughn Lazar and Michael Gordon.

"We really wanted to create something that would make a difference," says Lazar, 35, who left a career in advertising and graphic design to launch the two-year-old company. Gordon, 32, worked in real estate and property management.

Bored with their careers, Lazar and Gordon, who met as undergrads at Boca Raton's Florida Atlantic University, vowed to open a socially conscious small business. They began, as Lazar says, working in reverse, sketching a blueprint of corporate objectives: good employee benefits, energy efficiency, environmental sustainability, community involvement. "So then we said, why not pizza?" recalls Lazar. "We figured food would be a great way to reach people."

The business plan was modest, starting with a bit of capital scraped together to open a single restaurant distinguished by its use of organic ingredients and hybrid delivery vehicles. When it opened, in Deerfield Beach in February 2006, the reaction was phenomenal, and soon the partners were weighing franchise offers. "We never expected it," says Lazar.

As of early March four restaurants were in operation, 10 more are scheduled to open within the year, and the duo has signed deals for 53 additional franchise units in 10 states. The company, which employs 12, charges a \$30,000 franchise fee plus 5% royalty on all sales.

Customer feedback on its eco-friendly practices has helped fuel additional "green" measures such as the use of biodegradable pizza boxes, energy-efficient appliances and recycled building materials.

Wholesale organic ingredients cost 20% to 30% more than non-organic; the green building practices add about 10% to construction costs. The company has been careful to select locations where customers are willing to pay a bit extra for their meal. Lazar admits to a low-tech, low-cost form of market research: targeting neighborhoods close to Whole Foods and other high-end grocery stores. He's turned down franchise offers if the location seems a bad fit.

"People need to be willing to pay a bit more," says Lazar. "But at the end of the day if we're not making good pizza we'll be out of business real quick."

Clark Environmental - *Mulberry*

Cleaning up petroleum sludge isn't a glamorous business. But with thousands of underground gas tanks in central Florida and soil along highways contaminated with fuel and other nonhazardous substances, there's plenty of waste to be cleaned up.

Beth Clark, 52, president of Clark Environmental, opened the Mulberry company with her husband Jim, 56, in 1991. It's been a rocky ride, including two periods in which the couple "almost lost the company" due to competition and a delay in opening the company's state-of-the-art \$2 million thermal treatment facility in 2004.

Since the 75-ton-per-hour high-temperature thermal treatment plant came online, though, business has been brisk. Driving the cleanup in part is a Florida statute mandating that gas stations replace their tanks by 2009. In addition to petroleum waste from gas station tanks and contaminated soil along highways, Clark Environmental has worked with developers to clean up building sites and with power companies to clean areas around transformers hit by lightning. The company also is positioning itself to handle coal tar in the ground.

Sludge treatment begins by separating liquids and solids at Clark Environmental's conventional waste processing facility. Solids go through thermal processing, which includes a thorough heating and incineration process. The final residue, called "cleanfill," is sold for road construction and commercial construction projects.

The company also makes "drum runs" around the state to pick up hazardous and nonhazardous wastes and offers a hazardous waste disposal service. In 2007, Clark Environmental, which employs 26, posted \$7 million in sales for the first time, and this year, Beth says she expects that number to increase, despite the recession. "We're actually holding on pretty good," she says, "It seems to be working."

#### Green Tee Clothing Company - *Miami*

Jose Beguiristain dreams of producing an organic-material T-shirt for the masses at about \$3 a pop. For now he's touting the stylish offerings from his Green Tee Clothing Company that retail for about \$30. "We want to make organic clothing accessible to everyone," says Beguiristain. "That's what this green movement is all about."

Beguiristain, a Miami apparel industry veteran, teamed with designer Danny Leder to produce and distribute T-shirts made of organically grown cotton and bamboo, and with price tags far lower than the \$80 to \$100 range that many fashionable boutiques charge. The two partners call it a "perfect marriage." Leder pairs his design background with the production capacity of Beguiristain, whose principal company, B-Line Apparel, supplies corporate-branded T-shirts to large customers like Bacardi, Progressive Insurance and Royal Caribbean International. B-Line's Miami facility can churn out up to 20,000 shirts a day. (Annual sales are about \$7 million.)

Organic cotton and bamboo, acquired from India and Turkey, are grown without pesticides, fertilizers or other chemicals. The raw material cost is 30% to 40% higher. And other eco-friendly practices, such as using water-based paints for printing and demanding improved working conditions for overseas laborers, further raise the cost of production. "Once you start getting into the green movement you realize there are so many other things you can do better," says Leder.

For now Green Tee's line is available in trendy boutiques like Urban Outfitters, BASE and Fred Segal. The company, which launched in late 2007 and includes one other design person in addition to Beguiristain and Leder, hopes to top \$500,000 in sales its first year. As demand for their and others organic clothing increases, farming practices will adapt, apparel production costs will drop and consumers will find broader, more affordable organic clothing options. "When the price comes down everybody wins," says Beguiristain.

#### Marpan Recycling - *Tallahassee*

As landfills rise, so does the cost of dumping there. "It seems like such a waste," says Kim Williams, president and majority owner of Tallahassee's Marpan Supply, whose wholly owned subsidiary, Marpan Recycling, began operations in March, processing construction and demolition debris into reusable material.

"I just felt it was the right thing to do," says Williams, who also promotes green business practices as a founding member of the non-profit group Sustainable Tallahassee. "It also makes good business sense."

Leon County charges \$36 per ton to dump at its landfill; Marpan Recycling charges \$34, and hopes to resell 75% of the processed debris, as raw cardboard, steel, asphalt shingle, rock and other material.

The \$5.5-million plant can handle up to 500 tons of debris a day, operating as many as 309 days out of the year. Williams, 56, expects first-year revenues of between \$2 million and \$3 million, but operating at full capacity, with about 20 employees, the company should take in more than \$5 million. Marpan Supply, the parent company, which hauls debris for commercial customers, will be the plant's largest customer, having paid more than \$1 million last year in landfill tipping fees alone.

The state-of-the-art plant sorts, grinds and compacts the reusable material for shipping. As a rule of thumb, he says, recycling plants are profitable if they return 50% of the debris to the market as reusable material. To achieve the 75% goal, Williams visited similar plants in Europe, which is more advanced in recycling technology than the U.S. due to higher energy and materials costs.

"Nowadays everyone in the waste business talks about recycling and being more efficient and more energy conscious," says Williams. "And our motto reflects that: Faster, cheaper, cleaner and greener."