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Going for the green

With no national standards, eco-sensitivity is in the eye of the beholder

by Kevin James Shay and Chris Huntemann | Staff Writers

Ecoprint was green long before it became a hot marketing buzzword, employing environmentally sensitive ink and other measures during the printing company's 33-year history.

As executives with the Silver Spring company say on their website, "We were 'eco' before 'eco' was cool."

But in the past six months, founder and president Roger Telschow has been contacted by at least six organizations that want to certify Ecoprint as green, usually asking for fees ranging from \$50 to several thousand dollars. As more companies buy a green cachet for themselves, the trend both amuses and befuddles people such as Telschow who have embraced environmentally friendly practices for decades.

"We know what we do," Telschow said. "I don't have time to pursue looking into all these organizations to figure out if their certification will benefit us."

It can be a hard decision for many business executives who want to gain a competitive edge to attract consumers in a difficult market.

"If it comes down to two companies with similar products, it might make a difference to consumers that one competitor is green-certified and another is not," said Gary Skulnik, president of Clean Currents of Rockville, which brokers and aggregates electricity from renewable sources and is green-certified locally with Montgomery County and nationally with Green America.

Adopting environmentally friendly practices such as recycling programs and energy-efficient appliances can help companies green their bottom lines, and not just through cost savings and more customers, said Steven Chafitz, president of e-End. The Frederick company recycles computers and other electronic equipment.

Contracts can be won, he said. "Large corporations are looking for green vendors; it's the real deal," Chafitz said.

Getting certified can also boost employee morale and is the right thing to do for the environment, Skulnik said.

"I think it does make a difference to be certified," he said.

This week, Clean Currents was honored by the state of Maryland's incubator awards in a new category, Green Company of the Year. That the state added the category to its 10th annual incubator awards program, which historically has honored businesses in fields such as life sciences and information technology, also lends credence to the growth of the trend.

"It is very satisfying to win this award, which recognizes the creativity, the hard work and the success we've had in bringing clean energy to thousands of people and businesses in our area," Skulnik said.

So, what is a green business?

If there's one thing that few seem to agree on, it's a clear definition of what makes a company, or economy, green. The Montgomery County Green Economy Task Force, which spent months coming up with recommendations, acknowledged that dilemma in its report issued in March.

The report noted that the Maryland Governor's Workforce Investment Board defines a business as green if it develops or sells "products and services that promote energy security and/or protects our environment." But members decided that was too narrow a definition because it would not cover companies engaging in locally produced products and foods or in the building industry.

"After considering whether a single definition of the green economy should be adopted, in the end the task force decided that a one-size-fits-all approach would not be useful," the report says. It also noted that "there is no national definition of what constitutes the 'green economy,' so it is difficult to benchmark and monitor Montgomery County's progress against other jurisdictions."

Sustainable-energy business executives also find it hard to define the term.

"It means different things to different folks," said Brent Hollenbeck, founder and CEO of TimberRock Energy Solutions in Frederick, a solar energy startup.

With so much often-conflicting information circulating, "you have to work hard to educate would-be customers," he said. But solar energy has been around for 30 years and its savings "are very well-documented," Hollenbeck said.

Walking the green walk

The lack of a clear definition and the desire to gain a competitive edge have led numerous companies to market themselves as green simply for doing something as small as putting out a few recycling bins around the office while they continue to pollute in other ways. It's known as green-washing.

Among those most guilty of green-washing are large energy, oil and auto companies such as General Electric, BP and General Motors, according to 24/7 Wall St., a financial information website.

It does not behoove a company to simply state it is green, Chafitz said. "If you talk the talk, you have to walk the walk," he said.

If a company wants to be a good environmental steward, it must have an environmental management system, Chafitz said.

Some certification programs go out of their way to point out that they don't certify green-washers. The Green Business League, a Plainfield, Ill., organization that has certified companies since 2005, bills its program as one that is "earned, and not bought. No greenwashing allowed since every company is audited annually by a certified green consultant."

In April, Ridgely Retreat, an Annapolis center offering acupuncture, massage, facials and meditation classes that was founded in 2003, obtained certification from the Green Business League

"It seemed to fit what we were looking for," said owner Andrea Lichtenstein. "They have advised us on how we can do more in this area."

Using environmentally friendly cleaning supplies, paint and a water filtration process are among the practices at Ridgely. Employees there regularly recycle waste, even taking it home if the city does not regularly pick it up, Lichtenstein said.

In the printing industry, there are organizations and companies that allow printers to use logos once they fill out forms and go through the process, Telschow said.

"It sounds great," he said. "But most of them want you to pay a fee every year and fill out forms saying you are making progress toward energy conservation and other goals. Most don't do audits."

The Federal Trade Commission is among the government agencies that have cracked down more on businesses that mislead consumers on green practices, said Michael Luzier, CEO of the National Association of Home Builders Research Center in Upper Marlboro.

"People can articulate green standards and provide proof of their green certification," he said.

A legitimate business utilizing green services "can quickly answer questions," Luzier said. "It's like a rite of passage, like a doctor getting licensed."

Costs involved

Montgomery County started its green business certification program late last year. Modeled after ones such as the Bay Area Green Business Program in California, Montgomery's has certified about 20 businesses.

The cost of county certification, which is valid for two years, is \$100 for small businesses and \$250 for companies with 25 or more full-time employees.

Fees to join other certification programs can reach several thousand dollars. Green America in Washington, D.C., formerly the Co-op America organization, which established a green business network in 1992, has a nominal screening fee for "approved members" of \$25.

But to become a member of the network, businesses pay annual membership dues based on annual revenues. Dues range from \$85 for businesses with annual revenues of less than \$500,000, to \$2,000 for those with revenues of more than \$100 million, according to its website.

The benefits to Green America members include listing in national directories, discounts on business services and conferences, festival advertising opportunities, access to market products on WorldofGood.com by eBay, and appearances in the Find Green application on iPhone, BlackBerry and Google Android.

It was a fairly extensive process to obtain certification from Montgomery County, said Dave Taghipour, owner of All Eco Center in Wheaton. The showroom offers green products such as solar lights, high-efficiency dual flush toilets and environmentally friendly carpeting and flooring.

"I think it will be helpful eventually," Taghipour said. All Eco Center's practices include using products such as green toilets, having natural lighting and offering employees incentives to carpool or take public transit.

Clean Currents is not only certified by the county and Green America, but is a member of environmental

programs that don't conduct hands-on audits. The latter includes the Maryland Green Business Registry, a free listing operated by the state, and Bethesda Green, a public-private partnership that provides seminars and other programs.

Montgomery County is doing a good job with its certification program, Skulnik said. "They educate you on what you can do to become more sustainable," he said.

Executives at Clean Currents have surveyed some other green certification programs, but it is hard to discern the more credible ones, Skulnik said. "There seems to be a lot of duplication. It can get confusing," he said.

A national one-stop, more clear-cut program for green business certification is needed, Skulnik said.

"I think we are heading towards that," he said.

What makes a business green?

-Maryland Governor's Workforce Investment Board: "The system of production, exchange, distribution and consumption of goods and services produced by any business or entity directly engaged in the research, development, manufacture, sale, distribution, installation, or application of products and/or services that promote energy generation, efficiency and conservation, renewable and alternative energy production, waste management and/or organizations that are focused on environmental stewardship."

-Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation: "A green economy is a dynamic, sustainable, and economically robust market system that responsibly utilizes scarce and finite natural resources, and that protects, restores, preserves, and enhances our environment, while improving the social conditions of workers and customers now and in the future."

-Montgomery County Green Economy Task Force: "The green economy means different things to different people. ... After considering whether a single definition of the green economy should be adopted, in the end the task force decided that a one-size-fits-all approach would not be useful."

-Green America: Businesses that "make transparent to the public their commitment to social justice and environmental sustainability."... They "address economic justice issues within their businesses. Some put caps on the ratio of top to bottom salaries. Many have profit-sharing plans that include all the workers, not just top management, or they are worker-owned."... They "make products that are built to last and designed to reduce waste."

Who certifies businesses as green?

-Montgomery County Green Business Certification Program, mcgreenbiz.org.

-Maryland Residential Green Building Council, www.homebuilders.org/page/marylandresidentialgreenbuildingcouncil.

-Sustainable Business Network of Washington, www.sbnw.org.

-Green Business Network, Green America (formerly Co-op America), Washington, D.C., www.greenamericatoday.org/cabn.

-Green Business League, Plainfield, Ill., www.greenbusinessleague.com.

-American Consumer Council Green CTM Certification Program,
www.americanconsumercouncil.org/green.

-U.S. Green Building Council, Washington, D.C., www.usgbc.org.

-Green Building Certification Institute, Washington, D.C., www.gbci.org.

-Green Building Institute, Jessup, www.greenbuildinginstitute.org.

-Green Restaurant Association, Boston, www.dinegreen.com.

Who offers green directories or services?

-Maryland Green Registry, Baltimore, www.mde.maryland.gov/MarylandGreen.

-Bethesda Green, Bethesda, www.bethesdagreen.org.

-Chesapeake Sustainable Business Alliance, Baltimore, www.csballiance.org.