

LEED by Example

And Reap Long-Term Savings

By Tom Wilkowske



Do you insist on employees doing their work under your watchful gaze, even though they could be doing it at home, without driving their cars to the office?

Do you keep using good old incandescent bulbs in the conference room, because you tried those squiggly ones 10 years ago and they were no good?

Do you think you can't make an environmental impact because you're a small business owner who's not in the position to build a sleek, new green showcase office?

Think again. Energy prices are shooting up. Customers are demanding more environmental accountability. Green issues seem to have reached a nearly universal level of awareness.

Some businesses have larger carbon footprints than others, but most can find ways to make them smaller, say experts and business owners who have found a niche delivering eco-friendly products and services or have incorporated green concepts into their regular business.

One of the first places to look at improving is the business setting. If your office is more than a few years old, chances are it can be made more energy-efficient. If you own your own building, you can

Buildings can also carry the LEED stamp of approval. Based on a complicated point rating system, LEED rates a building in six broad categories, including building site, materials, and energy and water use. Although it's voluntary, more and more businesses are asking for their buildings to be LEED-certified. Not only does the energy efficiency save money over time, LEED status can confer immediate bragging rights to green-conscious customers, according to Ryan Turner, another LEED-accredited architect at DSGW.

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have greater control, but you can still have an impact even if you're renting or leasing, according to John Erickson, one of four architects at DSGW Architects in Duluth who is specially trained in environmentally sensitive building practices.

“Even if you're negotiating a lease, you have some leverage,” he says. Example: “You can ask, ‘Am I paying electric? If I'm paying the electric bill, I don't want incandescent lights.’”

Erickson is accredited by the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program.

“They're doing LEED because they have a conscience, but some of that doesn't directly affect the bottom line. That could be seen as more of a PR piece or a feel-good thing,” he said.

For example, using recycled content carpeting, steel and ceiling tile and finishes low in volatile organic compounds doesn't necessarily save money. Sometimes they cost more than conventional products. “But it's the right thing to do, so it's still a plus,” he says.

Going for LEED certification is a very high standard and it's not right for every

project, Turner says. Certain features of the LEED point system – for example, minimizing passive solar heat gain – seem to be oriented toward southern latitudes, where cooling costs are high. “Here in Duluth, we might want to maximize solar heat gain, because our heating season is much longer,” he said.



John Erickson
DSGW Architects



Randy Larson
Metek & Co.

When a project is ready for inspection, LEED inspectors perform a building audit and write a report on whether the building meets or doesn't meet the standards.

"The value of LEED is a long-term value," says Erickson. "The fundamental struggle is finding that balancing point between front-end costs and long-term savings." And no matter how deep a client's pockets might seem to be, economics are always there. "It's rare when we get someone who says, 'Do everything possible, there's no budget limit.'"

"We've been doing it for a long time."

Architects and builders can play a role informing customers of the latest building products, which are continually being improved.

"Everybody's going green now," says Randy Larson, owner of general

contracting firm Metek & Co., which was founded in 1978. "We've been doing it for a long time."

Larson touts several products that represent next-generation leaps over previous industry standards.

He uses Accurate Dorwin pultruded fiberglass windows, a Canadian product that performs better and lasts longer than wood, vinyl or aluminum windows.

His firm also uses an electrochromatic glass from Sage Glass of Faribault, Minn., in skylights and other hard-to-shade windows. "You push a button and a low-voltage charge aligns lithium ions and makes the glass go dark," he says. That allows a building owner to let in solar heat gain, but control it seasonally or during parts of the day when it's too intense, he says.

And Metek also uses Viessmann condensing boilers from Germany, which are more than 95 percent efficient, including in a school remodeling project in Maple, Wis. Made with stainless steel and titanium, Viessmann boilers incorporate

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another sustainable building principle: long life. Some of the early high-efficiency boilers in the U.S. market are failing after only five years, he said. "I hear from frustrated people who are tired of products that don't work."

Business owners don't need to be doing major work to save money on energy costs, Larson says. He recently spoke with a homeowner for whom he had installed a solar water heating system. "The temperature in the tank was 150 degrees in early July," he says.

And they might even get some assistance from the state. A law that went into effect July 1 provides some financial assistance for solar heating systems. Contact the Minnesota Office of Energy Security: Stacy Miller, (561) 282-5091.

If you do happen to be building or remodeling the office, what happens to the waste? "My niche is recycling construction and demolition debris," says Steve Christen, owner of AA Rolloff Service. AA ("Always Available") doesn't own a landfill, so its only way to make money is to recycle aggressively. "We take that waste product back to our processing station and pull out the things that are recyclable for local markets—odd cuts of scrap metal, the wood, and the masonry products," he says.

Building projects attempting LEED certification need to recycle their waste products. That's what earned AA Rolloff some business when it worked on a recent building project at Lake Superior College, Christen noted.

"I believe the future of our industry is to take a natural resource, be it a tree or whatever, and use it two or three times before sending it to disposal," he says.

If you're not building, not remodeling, what can you do?

Many small business owners in the area are already making the choice to use more recycled and environmentally friendly products, according to Traci Thoreson, benefits and sustainability coordinator at the Hermantown Sam's Club.



Traci Thoreson
Sam's Club

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Watch This Group of GREEN Pioneers

THE SUSTAINABLE TWIN PORTS EARLY ADOPTERS PROJECT is a mouthful of a label for a simple idea: get 15 organizations together to share and act on ideas to become more environmentally friendly.

Sustainable Twin Ports (www.sustainabletwinports.org) grew out of the Sustainable Duluth and We Mean Green projects of the Knight Creative Communities Initiative. It pitched a proposal to the Zeppa Family Foundation to start an “early adopters” demonstration project.

Fifteen applicants out of 26 were chosen, and the choice wasn't easy, according to Jerry Hembd, associate professor of economics at the University of Wisconsin-Superior and member of the Early Adopters steering committee. “We were surprised by the amount of interest and impressed by the mix of applicants. It's exciting.”

The project will use some of the principles devised by The Natural Step (www.thenaturalstep.org), a Sweden-based think tank founded by scientist Karl-Henrik Robert to guide business and other organizations toward greater environmental and social sustainability. Hembd said the Early Adopters project is interested in other sustainability models as well.

Participants are: Challenge Center; City of Duluth; Inn on Lake Superior, ZMC Hotels; Duluth Grill (Embers); Superior Public Schools; London Road Car Wash; Superior Housing and Redevelopment Authority; Gloria Dei Lutheran Church; Douglas County; Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce; Glenwood Signs and Awards; Duluth Transit Authority; Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation; Twin Ports Testing; University of Wisconsin-Superior.

The year-long program formally launches in September and includes in-depth training, work on case studies and development of action plans for each group. “Besides the organization having its own plan at the end of this, it's also a peer learning network where members can share what works and what doesn't,” Hembd said.

What if you don't want to wait for the group to publicize its ideas?

Hembd recommends checking out The Natural Step's Web site. The Duluthian did so and found a wealth of information, including:

Oregon's The Natural Step Web site (www.ortns.org), which appears to be one of the most developed Natural Step networks in the U.S.

Look Under Business Resources, Services, for the report “TNS Eco-Indicators: Findings from the TNS Eco-Indicators Peer Learning Group,” Oregon Natural Step Network, 2003. (www.ortns.org/documents/Eco-IndicatorReport.pdf). Members of that group calculated the impact of materials choices and industrial waste—even the cost of employee commutes to the office.

That report also contains a “Greening of Business” section including the following links:

- Center of Excellence for Sustainable Development (www.smartcommunities.ncat.org)
- Business for Social Responsibility (www.bsr.org)
- Global Environmental Management Initiative (www.gemi.org)
- INFORM Inc. (www.informinc.org)

“I'd say requests for green supplies have doubled” within the last year, says Thoreson. “People are looking for ways to go green and that's been a huge push for our members,” many of whom include small business owners.

Sam's Club is owned by Wal-Mart, which grabbed headlines in 2006 when it announced an effort to sell 100 million compact fluorescent bulbs, an average of one to each of its regular customers. It met the goal about a year later.

Now, “We don't even sell incandescent bulbs any more,” Thoreson says.

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Ryan Turner
DSGW Architects

Sam's Club stocks pens, paper clips, pillows and even clothing made of recycled materials; some items are 100 percent recycled content. “All of our vendors have been asked if they can revise or think about a new way of packaging for our consumers, so we can have more sustainable products,” she says.

One example of reducing packaging has paid other dividends. Liquid laundry detergents are now sold in a concentration four times greater than before, which means less water content, smaller bottles, less weight for shipping—and less cost per unit, she says.

Sam's Club also has turned to its employees for ideas on sustainability, according to Thoreson. One employee suggested an electronics recycling drive, which was well received. Another takes it upon himself to sort aluminum and plastic cans and bottles from outdoor trash receptacles. **D**

Tom Wilkowske is a freelance writer based in Duluth.