

Small businesses jump on green bandwagon

Even home-based enterprises can save money, energy, supporters say

By ERIC RUTH
The News Journal

In these times of global commerce and light-speed market twitches, Kathy Brooks' backyard herb-and-vegetable business is a tiny speck in a universe of giants.

That doesn't mean she can't make a difference. And it's surely no reason not to try.

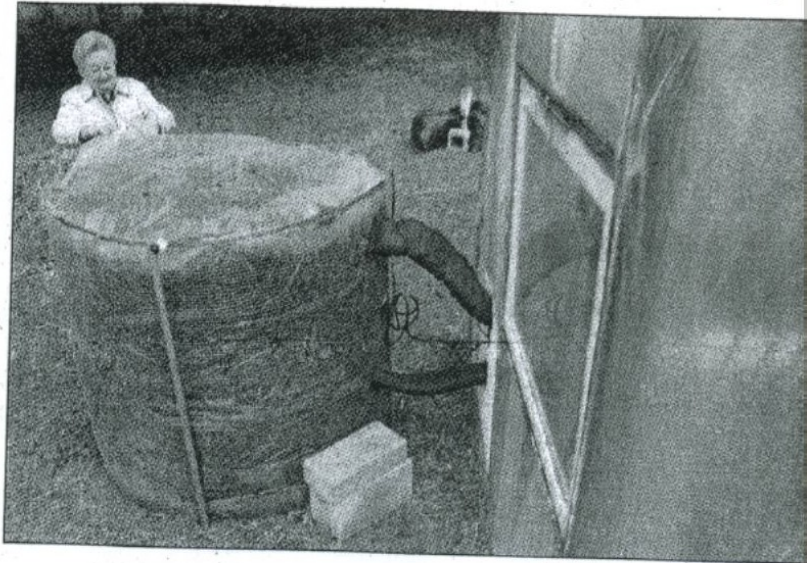
Brooks and other small-business owners in Delaware are starting to embrace the kind of "green" values that typically are associated with far larger companies and a far greater investment of time and money, taking small-but-earnest steps for the cause of conservation.

For Brooks, it's the small bit of electricity she saves by warming her greenhouse with the heat generated by compost. For restaurateur Ryan German, it's helping a customer conserve energy by giving him used fryer oil to use in his biofueled car.

In some cases, ecologically conscientious entrepreneurs are even finding that "green" sensibilities are not only good for the Earth, they're also good for business.

"I wanted to do something that felt like it made a contribution," said Matthew Lillard, a former MBNA employee and longtime Delawarean who recently started a home-based start-up called Green Savers, specializing in providing home energy audits and solutions.

Experts say that despite their relatively small scope, these efforts by small businesses are helping



Kathy Brooks, owner of a Felton-area produce and herb business, uses a compost heater to warm up her greenhouse. The News Journal/GARY EMEIGH

change the public's perception of how and where change can take place. In times of rising energy costs and increasing consumer demand for "green" solutions, experts believe business owners are also smart to start trying.

"I think there is a swiftly rising concern in the small business community," said Byron Kennard, executive director of the Center for Small Business and the Environment, a Washington, D.C., group that promotes green business initiatives. Half of all commercial and industrial energy consumption is by small businesses, according to the group.

In some cases, smaller firms are seeing the push for conservation come from above, as larger companies demand that their suppliers adopt ecologically sound practices.

In other cases, small businesses are finding that their dreams of becoming more environmentally responsible don't have to be as expensive or as complicated as they thought.

Such simple steps as installing efficient light bulbs can bring substantial savings, and the costs of going green are being offset by an assortment of financial incentives, from tax breaks to loans.

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Energy: The chance to boost your business while aiding environment

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Even if it's a step that provides little bottom-line incentive, a concern for Earth's future might make it worth doing, business owners say. As owner of Newark's Caffe Gelato, German saves nothing by giving his fryer grease to customer Paul Gassler – in fact, it ends up causing a few extra steps for the kitchen staff.

The payback is far more spiritual, he said. "It's kind of doing the right thing," said German, who believes such small steps often precede the bigger ones.

For Gassler, who takes home about 20 gallons of the restaurant's oil every month to fuel his 1998 Mercedes Turbodiesel, the effort is only partly driven by ecological motives. He spent \$1,400 on the kit that enabled the engine to burn the oil, but saves about \$900 a year in the bargain.

Small businesses are missing a chance to save even more by taking such steps as energy-efficient light bulbs, carpooling and programmable thermostats, conservation proponents say. "Small businesses waste an enormous amount of energy," Kennard said. "They're throwing money down the drain."

Kathy Brooks, on the other hand, seems to throw absolutely nothing away at the produce business she runs from her Felton home. Wood chips, plant trimmings and a dash of manure all end up in the composter she built alongside her 12-by-16-foot greenhouse. Beneath the pile sits a reservoir of water, which in turn is connected to rubber hoses that snake through the trimmings and into the greenhouse, carrying with them the heat generated by microbial activity within the compost. "I decided I needed something eco-friendly to heat the greenhouse," she said. "Electricity was expensive."

On a cool winter day, the natural heater can keep the interior of the greenhouse at a toasty temperature, letting her get a jump start on the growing season. By April, her "Misty Morning Herbs and More" products – ranging from cucumbers to herbal carpet fresheners – will be ready for the

SMALL BUSINESSES GOING GREEN

- Replace high-energy light bulbs and equipment. Your utility company may offer rebates, loans or grants to help with an energy-efficient transition.
- Buy recycled products. Examples: stationery, packaging materials, paper towels and other kitchen and bathroom supplies.
- Buy nontoxic, environmentally friendly products. Examples: cleaning supplies, inks, paints.
- Refill ink cartridges rather than toss them. Discard unneeded computers in an environmentally responsible way.
- Encourage carpooling. It even may be possible for some employees to telecommute, or to gradually switch your fleet to hybrid vehicles.
- Do more business online. Choose online banking over a trip; send documents via e-mail rather than a delivery service.
- "Tune-up" your heating, ventilating and air-conditioning system with an annual maintenance contract.
- Install an Energy Star qualified programmable thermostat to automate your HVAC system.
- Consider funding energy-saving through the Small Business Administration's 504 loan program, which includes energy efficiency upgrades.
- Try to buy more products from local suppliers, thus reducing the need for long-distance shipping.

Sources: USA Today, Environmental Protection Agency

Milford Farmer's Market.

With the help of a federal grant and Delaware State University, Brooks has been spreading word of the heater through the agricultural community, certain that something so simple and sensible should surely be embraced. "It's a win-win situation," she said.

That's also kind of how Lillard feels about his home energy-audit business – at the same time he makes a living, he feels that he's also making a difference.

"I wanted to help work toward global warming solutions" after leaving Wilmington-based credit card giant MBNA, said the New Garden, Pa., resident. For a \$300 to \$400 fee, Lillard measures energy efficiency with high-tech equipment, then advises the client on remedial steps, from weather stripping to windows.

The energy-audit business is growing in the region, he said, but high electricity prices hold the potential to give it an extra boost.

When he looks at what may lie ahead for the climate, Lillard feels more motivated himself. "Part of the reason I'm trying to do this is to spread the gospel," he said.

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ON THE WEB

www.energystar.gov/smallbiz. Federal Government's Energy Star site for small business.

www.askemap.org. Pennsylvania SBDC offers tips and guidance.

www.greenbiz.com. Directories of sites with environmental information; searchable database of government programs and assistance.

www.nadco.org. Trade association of companies that have been certified by the Small Business Administration to provide funding for small businesses.

www.thegreenoffice.com. Retailer of recycled, environmentally friendly and sustainable business products, school supplies, and paper.

www.coopamerica.org. Green advocacy organization and eco-driven online catalog.

geocities.com/aboutcsbe. Center for Small Business and the Environment.