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Water bottles tap into ecofriendly trend

Green Planet Bottling's bioplastic product part of push toward sustainability

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Minding Your Business

March 1, 2010

Drinking water out of plastic bottles made with petroleum and chemicals just didn't wash with Glencoe entrepreneur Brad Schulman.

Like many Americans, Schulman was concerned not only about chemicals from the bottles leaching into the water, but also about the 40 million empty containers thrown away daily, cluttering landfills, he said. "I felt passionate about pursuing this," said Schulman, who sold his beverage distribution business in 2008. "I thought, 'Can I live with myself if I don't do this?'"

So he launched Green Planet Bottling in March 2008, using his own funds to create a plant-based bioplastic bottle that is fully recyclable and compostable. When water heated to 170 degrees hits the bottle, it melts, returning to 100 percent virgin polymer, Schulman said.

"It's all about the bottle and where it ends up," he said.

While some environmentally friendly products stem from an entrepreneur's personal passion, others respond to consumers' growing concern about the environment, said Aimee Heilbrunn, president and founder of Ecoscene Inc., a Chicago-based Web site offering product reviews and information on ecofriendly products and services.

"The green movement has shown consistent growth over the past five to 10 years," Heilbrunn said. "People want to make more responsible purchases when they are able to," she said.

While consumers are clamoring for all types of green products, bottled water has become a hot topic as consumption has grown. Concern about the environmental impact has made drinking bottled water politically incorrect in some social circles, said Bruce Beck, director of business development at Design Resource Center in Naperville, who often drinks tap water out of a reusable bottle.

Concern about the petroleum used in plastic bottles, the energy required to manufacture and transport the products and the waste produced are taking a toll on consumption, experts said.



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The worldwide growth rate of bottled water slowed to 5 percent in 2008, after rising 6 percent to 10 percent a year for the past decade, according to the Worldwatch Institute, an independent research group focusing on environmental sustainability.

In the U.S., bottled-water consumption in 2008 fell 1 percent, to 32.8 billion liters, representing the first decline in 10 years, Worldwatch said in a report released Thursday. Still, the U.S. remains the world leader in bottled water, accounting for 16 percent of global consumption, according to the report.

Major companies are taking note and modifying other food products' packaging as well. Frito-Lay has launched a TV campaign for SunChips showing how the snack's packaging breaks down in 14 weeks. Coca-Cola Co. last year launched PlantBottle, partially made from plant-based resources.

"If big corporations are paying attention to it, that means consumers out there are concerned about biodegradable issues," Beck said. "That same mentality is going to impact virtually everything, but particularly water bottles."

Food-service clients, including hotels and schools, can earn a point toward Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification by carrying Schulman's Green Planet Bottling water. The product, which generally sells for \$1 to \$1.29 for a 16.9-ounce bottle, is available in 20 markets, including Chicago.

Schulman, who employs 12 workers, hopes to achieve \$3 million to \$4 million in sales this year.

Green Planet Bottling initially shied away from retail to focus on hospitality and food service, figuring that the decision-makers in those segments were likely to see value in the product's emphasis on sustainability, said investor Richard Kincaid, who also is president and founder of the BeCause Foundation, a nonprofit that aims to drive social change through documentary filmmaking.

While Green Planet Bottling continues to grow that portion of its business, the company recently released 1-liter and 12-ounce bottles to natural foods stores and is gearing up for online sales.

"It's really the right product at the right time," Kincaid said. "What I'm focusing on as an investor are things that have the potential to be profitable but make the world a better place. This falls squarely in that camp."

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