

Recycling other people's waste is the basis of his success

More than 1,500 office workers toil at One Franklin Plaza, and under each of their desks is a container with a label reading: "Mixed paper only. No plastic. No wet waste."

These containers are for such recyclable materials as office paper, cardboard, newspapers, computer printouts. At some distance from the workers' desks, but rarely more than a few steps away, are larger bins for the disposal of coffee cups, plastic bottles, apple cores, banana skins and other refuse.

At One Franklin's loading dock, the recyclable stuff is sent off to one destination, the trash and garbage to another. The amount of waste that must be burned or dumped is thus reduced. And the building owners are recovering much of their hauling expenses of \$3,500 to \$4,000 a month by selling the cardboard and other recyclables.

Businesses are required to set up recycling programs under state law and city ordinance, but few downtown office buildings are going about it as methodically as One Franklin, at 1601 Race Street. This 24-story, 607,000-square-foot office building, whose major tenant is SmithKline Beecham, began its comprehensive recycling program two months ago.

"If you can tear it," building manager John Ostertag said of waste, "we'll recycle it."

He said the program is already paying off. "Income from the recyclable paper is helping to cover the hauling cost," he said. "We're close to breaking even now, and once we get everybody in the building educated, we'll have substantial savings."

About 40 percent of the building's waste is being recycled, said Ostertag, and he hopes to reach 70 percent. He said he's gotten a good response from the building's office workers. "I think people are very conscious of the need for recycling, and they want to make it work," he said.

In setting up the program, Ostertag was assisted by Richard J. Fuller, a 34-year-old native Australian who heads an environmental-services firm, Great Forest Inc., in New York.

"Richard did a waste audit to figure out our volume of waste and what percentage was recoverable," said Ostertag, "and then he worked with the hauler to find outlets for the recyclable materials. He helped us put together a program using our cleaning staff so that we could increase our recyclables without increasing our labor costs."

Since founding his firm in 1990, Fuller has gone from one employee (himself) to a dozen, and from \$50,000 in first-year revenues to close to \$1 million this year. He helped set up aggressive recycling programs in more than 250 New York office buildings. Now, with

the assistance of his local aide, Jacqui Good, he is active here.

Indeed, in Philadelphia he has done something that he couldn't do in New York: He has won a consulting contract with the city government. Under his \$98,000 contract, Great Forest has designed a cohesive recycling program for 15 municipal buildings, ranging from Philadelphia's City Hall and the Municipal Services Building to police headquarters, fire headquarters and the Board of Education administration building.

"There was a competition," said Alfred Dezzi, deputy streets commissioner and the city's recycling coordinator. "Richard had the most visionary, aggressive, exciting ideas. He has a real keen eye for customers' needs and a wide range of experience, and he has found ways for us to save money in waste collection."

Dezzi waxes lyrical in discussing recycling. He sees it as a powerful movement that can "change the economic structure of the United States."

"We're taking something we used to throw away and turning it into a commodity," he said. "But it involves human nature. What we're talking about is change — positive, rapid change. Changing habits of how you dispose of waste."

Dezzi sees widespread recycling making this region more competitive economically. He envisions such a volume of recyclable material that a recycling mill will be built here.

Meanwhile, he's pushing for implementation of Fuller's plan, which calls for expanded recycling in a limited number of downtown municipal buildings. It recommends that a model program be launched in the newly refurbished Municipal Services Building. That effort has been delayed, said Dezzi, "because people are just moving back after the renovation." His office relocated there last week.

Dezzi hopes the various city agencies will take on recycling as a special project and "buy into" Fuller's plan. At the present time, he noted, office paper is being collected at City Hall, the courts, the Free Library and other municipal buildings, but, he added: "We need more education. We're not getting the tonnage we should be getting."

Dezzi's assistant, David Biddle, commercial solid-waste coordinator for the Streets Department, said that only a "minimum amount of high-grade white office paper" is being recycled by the city.

"It's very limited," he said. "We're going to change it to a mixed program to recover a lot more paper. Pamphlets, envelopes, catalogues, magazines, newspapers — all will be recycled as opposed to being put in the trash."

At the buildings studied by Great Forest there should be savings of



Peter Binzen
On Business



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Richard J. Fuller, the Australian who heads Great Forest Inc., checks out the flattened cardboard from one office building.

\$120,000 a year, said Biddle, "if we convert our current trash-disposal system to a mixed-office-paper and cardboard recycling system."

The city is required to enforce the state recycling law in the private sector. But it is given considerable latitude. "The approach we've taken," said Biddle, "is to move away from strict regulation. Let the market provide the best solution. People have been screaming bloody murder about big government, so we're allowing as much flexibility as possible."

Besides moving into Philadelphia, Richard Fuller's firm is active in Arlington, Va., where it is consulting with the owner of three buildings totaling 1.5 million square feet of office space. One of the buildings is occupied by USA Today, the Gannett Co.'s national daily newspaper.

"I knew so much about trash," said Bill Brakefield, manager of the three buildings, "that I figured he [Fuller] couldn't help a lot. Much to my chagrin, he saved me about \$36,000 a year in haulage costs."

It was in Manhattan that the young Australian made his mark, following a stint in Brazil's rain forest. His first job, after graduating from Melbourne University with a degree in electrical engineering in 1981, had been with IBM in Australia.

By his own account, Fuller "sold a whole lot of computers for them" in four years and found the work "very exciting." But when invited to join IBM's "fast-track management," he left the company. "The culture was very strait-laced," he said. "It turned me off."

While working for IBM, he had set up a nonprofit organization in Melbourne to focus on urban reforestation. It was "just starting to kick in" when the 27-year-old Fuller, a cardiologist's son, took his savings and left Australia in 1987.

"I decided I wanted to go skiing, live in a foreign country, learn a foreign language, and visit the rain forest of Brazil," he said. His pilgrimage took him first to Colorado, where he spent "three months on every ski area."

Then he flew to Brazil, where he soon found himself siding with natives, most of them poor and illiterate, who opposed the steady encroachment of cattle ranchers in the rain forest. He learned Portuguese, and, with financial support from two foundations, prepared a plan to convert "a bunch of land" there into a national park.

The eventual result, said Fuller, was Brazil's enactment of legislation establishing a 750,000-acre park in the rain forest. But not everybody was pleased with the Aussie's involvement. "It got pretty hot,"

Fuller said. "The landowners put a *pistoleiro*, a hired gun, after me. They conducted a slander campaign, saying I had molested a 6-year-old girl. Nobody would talk to me. I jumped on the next flight to New York."

Fuller's work had drawn the attention, but not the promised financial support, of environmentalists at the United Nations. He had other contacts in New York, as well. Hoping to capitalize on New York's new laws on recycling, he founded Great Forest (named for Brazil's *Grande Floresta*) in January 1990. It began as a one-man business in the Manhattan apartment Fuller shared with his wife-to-be, Puerto Rican-born Jacqueline Urrea.

His first assignment was to set up a recycling program for a 43-story office building at 520 Madison Ave. owned by Tishman Speyer Properties, one of New York's major landlords.

One job led to another after that, and Fuller now says Great Forest has consulted on recycling for one-third of the large office buildings in Manhattan and 35 hotels, including the New York Hilton and the Waldorf Astoria.

Bill Dacunto, properties coordinator for Silverstein Realty, said his company has saved more than \$500,000 a year in rubbish-removal costs, thanks to recycling programs

set up by Fuller's team in eight commercial office buildings in Manhattan with 10 million square feet of space.

Savings were "huge" at 7 World Trade Center, owned by Silverstein, said Dacunto. "They've done a lot of work for us, and it's worth it for us to retain them," Dacunto said.

Christie's, the auction house, is saving about \$2,500 a month at the two locations where Great Forest has instituted recycling, a spokesman said.

Fuller said that one building in Lower Manhattan where Great Forest did a trash audit and set recycling in motion is saving \$1 million a year. The building, at 55 Water St., has 52 stories and 3.5 million square feet.

"That's the exception," Fuller said. "Usually, we save people between 30 percent and 50 percent on trash removal, or \$100,000 a year for a big building. But 55 Water Street was being ripped off by the trash hauler."

Paul Vassil, representing the building owner, would only say that "savings were realized by the owner," an Alabama pension fund. He said Great Forest did the survey, constructed the bid package, and operated the bidding. "They were a part of the process," he said, "but I'm not sure they were the sole reason the price came down."