

Firm tries taming N.Y.'s recycling jungle

BY ALAN BREZNICK
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In the late 1980s, Richard Fuller spent a year in the Amazon combating sometimes deadly attempts by developers to encroach on the Brazilian rain forest. Although he didn't know it at the time, it was great training for his next career: tackling New York's mounds of commercial garbage.

"The parallels are strong," he says, chuckling. "You have to learn survival techniques pretty quickly."

So far, those survival techniques have paid off handsomely for the 32-year-old environmentalist. Despite formidable opposition from trash haulers who don't like seeing their business changed and their fees cut, Mr. Fuller has built his \$800,000 company, Great Forest Inc., into the city's leading provider of commercial recycling and solid waste management programs.

Now, with the Sanitation Department gearing up to force all 189,000 city businesses to sort and separate their garbage, Great Forest seems poised for even headier growth. Mr. Fuller, whose business has already developed recycling programs for 35 hotels and 250 office towers, aims to double

this 55 million square feet of commercial space in two years.

But as sorting and separating becomes mandatory next month for all residential and commercial buildings, four-year-old Great Forest faces more competition than ever before. Eyeing the potential bonanza, rival environmental consulting firms and such private trash haulers as Allied Sanitation Inc., Delmar Recycling Corp. and V. Ponte & Sons are all building their own recycling capability.

"I would bet that a lot of people are looking at that (mandatory recycling) as a business opportunity," says Marcia Bystryn, the city's assistant commissioner for recycling. "There are a lot of entrepreneurs in New York City."

Concerns about quality control

Mr. Fuller must also worry about quality control as he tries to expand rapidly in both New York and other locales. The 15-person company, which opened offices in Philadelphia and Washington earlier this year, is planning incursions into Chicago and London or Paris sometime next year.

"It gets pretty tight sometimes just managing this growth," Mr. Fuller admits. "Trying to open these offices takes a

lot of time out from here."

Nevertheless, Mr. Fuller has gotten this far by usually seeing the forest for the trees. Formerly a hotshot computer salesman for International Business Machines Corp., the Australian native spotted the rising tide of interest in reducing and reusing trash when he returned to New York from Brazil.

His first big break came when a friendly law firm—LeBoeuf, Lamb, Leiby & MacRae—referred him to its landlord, Tishman Speyer Properties. Great Forest set up a model recycling program at Tishman Speyer's flagship office building on Madison Avenue, working with its tenants to pull out white paper, corrugated cardboard, aluminum cans, bottles and other recyclables from the trash bins.

Tishman Speyer liked the program so much that Great Forest soon expanded it to the landlord's other major properties in Manhattan and Westchester County. That, in turn, led Great Forest to such other large real estate players as Mendik Co., Newmark & Co. Real Estate and Olympia & York Cos. (U.S.A.).

In the typical large hotel or office building that it serves, Great Forest usually reduces the waste load by 30% to 40%. That saves the owner about \$60,000 in annual

disposal costs. Mendik-owned 1740 Broadway, a 550,000-square-foot building, now recycles 150 tons of white paper, 40 tons of newspaper, 60 tons of cardboard and more than one ton of aluminum cans annually.

"We recycle everything," says Joseph Bellina, a Mendik vice president who managed the building until recently. He estimates the 26-story tower trimmed its carting bill by \$36,000 a year.

Six to eight weeks designing program

Great Forest consultants spend six to eight weeks designing a recycling program and two to three months installing it, for a combined fee of up to \$25,000, depending upon the size of the building. The company will then oversee the program for a maintenance fee of several hundred dollars per month.

Constantly seeking new recyclable materials to remove from the Dumpster, Great Forest is now studying how to reuse wood pallets. It's also looking at recycling food slop, a huge slice of garbage for hotels and restaurants, for use by pig farmers.

"Any time a market (for a recyclable material) opens up, we'll look to put that program in," Mr. Fuller says. "I really feel like we've tamed the jungle somewhat." ■



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