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[LEGAL](#)

[SCIENCE](#)

[URBAN](#)

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## A push for thinking green

BY SARAH BRUYN JONES

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When the Chicago Manufacturing Center launched a program encouraging environmentally friendly manufacturing, Marvin Kline was thrilled.

"There are tremendous business opportunities for every company, but it might be a change in the way they look at things," Kline, president of PortionPac Chemical Corp., said. "But it's a wonderful opportunity to increase sales."

For the past two months PortionPac has posted record sales, and as customers continue to search out environmentally friendly products the company is banking on that trend continuing. Kline would not divulge PortionPac's sales figures, noting his private company is small -- 55 employees --- and has to compete with much larger corporations.

Located at 400 N. Ashland, PortionPac is one of only a few companies in the Chicago area that boast of making environmentally friendly products. Now Chicago Manufacturing Center is trying to spread that gospel through its GreenPlants initiative, which will introduce its members to the practice known as sustainability.

Sustainable manufacturing is also called green or cradle-to-cradle manufacturing. To be fully sustainable requires embracing environmentally sound manufacturing techniques to produce environmentally friendly products. A fully sustainable business does not rely on natural resources and produces no waste, twin standards that are more objectives than achievable.

Kline and his business partner Warren Weisberg founded PortionPac nearly 40 years ago with the basic concept of portion control in cleaning products such as laundry detergent by packaging them in pre-measured envelopes. While PortionPac produces a sustainable product, it is not a fully sustainable manufacturer.

Instead of selling as much product as possible, Kline said he is more interested in ensuring his company doesn't produce more waste than necessary. But there was a time when customers didn't care about PortionPac's social policy.

"For many years we quit talking about it," Kline said. "People didn't like tree huggers, and I don't think we're tree huggers, but I didn't want to be associated with that either."

Now with the Chicago Manufacturing Center highlighting companies like PortionPac as models of producing sustainable products, Kline said he's eager to see what else can be accomplished.

"It's not exactly a hot topic," confessed Karen Wan, GreenPlants program director. In a survey of Cook County manufacturers only 2 percent said green manufacturing was an important business principle, while 98 percent said survival is most important. But GreenPlants is touting the message

is most important. But GreenPlants is taking the message that green manufacturing is the key to future survival.

To develop GreenPlants, which launched in November, the center solicited help from Hunter Lovins, a leading figure in the sustainability movement. Together they developed an interactive Web course to recruit Chicago-area manufacturers to the GreenPlants network and illustrate how sustainability creates a higher quality of life for citizens and an economic advantage for businesses.

"We think this is one of the innovative trends for the future," Wan said. "Businesses need to be aware of their place in the universe, and understand that they need to use resources wisely, not only for their benefit but for the benefit of society. And they will be judged on that."

With Lovins reporting 75 percent of Fortune 1,000 companies implementing sustainable practices and 150 of the largest companies having a "sustainability officer" at the vice president level, Wan said smaller manufacturers have to become sustainable to compete.

Smaller manufactures like PortionPac already see their road to sustainability as a competitive advantage.

Jill Salisbury, president and CEO of el: Environmental Language LLC, is so convinced she has a competitive advantage with her design of environmentally friendly furniture that she refuses to divulge which Chicago-area manufacturer has agreed to abide by her guidelines for making her "eco-chic" furniture.

"It was a challenge to find manufacturers who were willing to take the leap of faith with us," she said.

Salisbury founded el four years ago, and hired an environmental consultant to help her rethink how to manufacture green furniture. The standards she imposes include everything from using a natural lacquer for the finish to regulating sawdust in the plant and forbidding cigarette smoking while her furniture is being built.

The result is "non-toxic" residential furniture for the environmentally conscious consumer. Individual consumers and interior designers are buying her furniture, which is on display in her shop in Chicago's Merchandise Mart.

"We aren't looking for instant gratification, banging out as much furniture as possible," she said. "This isn't about making as much money as quickly as possible it is about the quality for us."

Salisbury founded el four years ago. Since el's first line of furniture premiered in 2003, Salisbury said she couldn't quantify the growth of her business. But her second line of furniture is due out later this month and the number of visitors to el's Web site is up 300 percent.

Besides helping businesses achieve a competitive advantage, Wan said GreenPlants is in line with Mayor Richard M. Daley's goal of making Chicago the "greenest" city in the country. While the center's GreenPlants initiative is funded in part by a U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration grant, it is not receiving any city or state funding.

Along with el and ProtionPac, Wan is working with nearly two dozen other companies and organizations in the six-county Chicago area to form a network of sustainability. Wan said she hopes to have completed several case studies on these

she hopes to have completed several case studies on these early participants by the end of the year.

"We've developed projects with three manufacturers and are in discussions with several more," Wan said without naming the companies. "By the end of the year, I expect to have at least five substantive manufacturing success stories to be able to share."

The case studies will ultimately be used to encourage other small manufacturers in the area to get on board.

Some large companies already have embarked on manufacturing cradle-to-cradle products, with Eastman Kodak Co. and Xerox Corp. among the leaders. Xerox is reusing components of old machines in remanufacturing a new machine. Kodak also is remanufacturing, taking old, single-use, disposable cameras and recycling the parts to make a new disposable camera. The parts can be reused up to nine times, the company says.

"This is a wonderful example of providing the customer with what they need, but by taking the older cameras back and remanufacturing them, we are able to charge a lot less," said Nabil Nasr, director of the Rochester Institute of Technology's Center for Integrated Manufacturing Studies.

But the most sustainable companies are located outside the United States and advocates say it's time for U.S. businesses to follow suit.

"It is definitely a trend we see globally, and it's stronger in Europe,"

Nasr said. "We also see a huge movement in Japan, even in China, also in Korea. I think the Europeans are ahead in terms of the awareness and government intervention."

While government regulations in other countries have helped propel sustainability into mainstream vocabulary, Nasr said laws are not necessarily the way to encourage U.S. businesses to preserve natural resources and be socially conscious, while still earning a profit.