

## Eco-consulting firm looks to plant seeds of growth

**The challenge: How to expand without losing control. The plan: Gradually expand east or south. The payoff: Riding the green wave**

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When energy giant B.C. Hydro was casting for help in shrinking its carbon footprint, it landed on a tiny Vancouver environmental consulting outfit called **Green Workplace**.

So, too, did eco-friendly retailer Lululemon Athletica.

The founders of Green Workplace, Nicholas Lamm, 30, and Shamus Finnegan, 32, are committed environmentalists with academic and sweat-equity credentials: Mr. Lamm is an environmental scientist while Mr. Finnegan is a philosophy major with a background in tree planting.

Their Green Workplace concept grew out of a federally funded program in 2001. When funding ended in 2006, Mr. Lamm and Mr. Finnegan incorporated and carried on consulting on a fee-for-services basis, specializing in environmental assessments and employee training and education.



While consulting is their mainstay, they also take on greening projects for clients such as the City of Vancouver, which hired them last summer to install energy- and water-saving faucets in more than 700 restaurant kitchens.

Another sideline is an eco-driving program that teaches a company's employees how to drive in ways that save fuel.

"We offer a win-win proposition," Mr. Lamm says.

"Save the environment and save money by reducing consumption and making your company more efficient."

So far, Green Workspace has helped save thousands of trees and divert tonnes of waste from landfills with only four full-time employees, including Mr. Lamm and Mr. Finnegan, and several interns working out of a rented space in downtown Vancouver.

About 85 per cent of their business comes from referrals, and the partners have already received calls of interest from potential clients in Calgary, Ottawa and Toronto.

"What we'd like to do this fall is buy office space in Vancouver for our head office, to build equity in the business," Mr. Finnegan says.

They would also like to expand while the demand is hot, opening branch offices either east in Canada or south in the United States.

But the partners say they want to make sure they don't lose their hands-on personal approach to customer service as the business grows.

"It's a proven business and we want to grow. But how?" asks Mr. Finnegan.

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## What the experts say

Stewart Thornhill, associate professor of Strategic Management and Entrepreneurship at the Richard Ivey School of Business in London, Ont., says the timing is great for Green Workplace. He says there is a voracious appetite for this kind of business right now.

"It's frustrating for an entrepreneur to see that there's more demand than they can service," Mr. Thornhill says. "But it's essential to balance that demand by not stretching yourself too thin."

Because Green Workplace is a service industry, he says the first thing the partners should do is sit down and decide how fast they can bring new employees along. They also need to be clear on the kinds of skills they need and why.

For most startups, it's tough to compete in salaries. At the same time, "you get what you pay for," warns Mr. Thornhill. "If they are cash poor, are they willing to give away a piece of the company or profit-share to get good people?"

He also recommends they do an attitude check before they hire anyone, because their business depends on service. "Never hire anyone you have doubts about," Mr. Thornhill says. "It can be fatal to a small company."

He suggests the partners develop a strong narrative about their firm's mission because money isn't always the main motivator for environmentalists. And when the first branch office opens, they should be on-site to set it up and get it going.

"They need to get the model down first," Mr. Thornhill says. "Once they have a process in place - after the first three or four - they can step back and delegate. But they will still need to make frequent business visits to mentor and monitor." Mr. Thornhill says he suspects that Green Workplace may have lots of competition soon, but he thinks it can rise to the top by delivering superior service and building the brand. "Word of mouth is the best form of advertising, because it's free."

Bruce Poon Tip, founder and chief executive officer of G.A.P Adventures, knows a bit about expanding a business. Starting with credit-card loans, he launched what is now the world's largest adventure travel company, with more than 500 staff in offices throughout Canada and the world.

He thinks that Green Workplace first needs to establish a business plan and do a feasibility study that looks at the demand for its services and local competitors it could be up against.

On the subject of expansion, Mr. Poon Tip is "a big fan of organic growth."

"Identify early who your stars are and keep them in mind when you need to send someone to launch a new location. You need to have someone who has been working directly with you and who carries the essence of your brand."

Mr. Poon Tip suggests that they always have people on board who are mobile and willing to take on a startup in another city. "People who are mobile are very valuable to me - and a big consideration in our recruiting process," he says.

A high-growth company must constantly get better in two areas: leadership and recruiting practices, Mr. Poon Tip advises.

Ultimately, the owner's energy and enthusiasm for the business needs to be channelled through other people.

"It's a big jump from when you start a company and can lead by example because everyone is in the same room," Mr. Poon Tip says. "You will only be as successful as your ability to let go and trust others."

## In a nutshell

### PROCEED WITH CAUTION

If you go too fast, you can lose touch with your people and operations.

### HIRE THE BEST PEOPLE

Bring in passionate people to represent whatever product or service you're offering. Don't settle for mediocrity.

### GET THE MODEL DOWN FIRST

Stay hands-on while you're getting the expansion process in place. Only then should you step back and delegate.

### KEEP YOUR SUITCASE PACKED

Make frequent business visits to mentor and monitor.

### BE A LEADER

You have to motivate people to reach their potential without being right beside them every day.

### CREATE A GREAT ENVIRONMENT

Build a great company and great people will find you.

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