

Sustainability implies striving for continuous improvement

Posted on [December 15, 2011](#) by [Frank](#)



When Jane Cutter called her friend, Danis Chamberlin, two years ago to discuss a business idea, her timing could not have been better. Cutter, who owned and operated [Alternate Transit Advertising](#) in Greenland, New Hampshire, had a new approach in mind for running a large-format printing business and she knew exactly who she wanted to manage it.

“Jane’s vision for a print company with an eco-driven aspect to it represented a departure from everything that was wrong with the other place,” recalled Chamberlin, who had worked for more than a decade at another printer and was “past ready for a career change.”

Essentially, the women sought to build a sustainable sign shop from the ground up. In August 2009, Chamberlin became print manager for [Riverworks Printing](#) in Greenland.

Jane’s husband and business partner, Jeff Cutter, an avid fly fisherman, saw the new venture as a way to bring ATA’s commercial and transportation signage in-house while greening up the print process.

“After so many years of helping Jane and seeing the volume of plastic signs thrown away after ad campaigns, it was apparent that there had to be a better way. Now we save on shipping and time, and recycle the waste,” said Jeff Cutter.

“I have been in this industry for 13 years and for most of that time I had been wanting to do things differently,” said Chamberlin. “It was so many things that bugged me, big and little. I hated the terrible materials, outsourcing to China, indifference to waste, and poor treatment of employees.”

Chamberlin is careful to explain that Riverworks is *eco-driven* but not exclusively green. “We can’t be green-only and keep our lights on. We look carefully at products with a holistic approach, but sometimes we can’t get around traditional signage. Take polystyrene for example; we tried for two years to find a substitute but nothing was low enough cost to let us be competitive.”

How much longer will being green cost more?

“Right now we reduce our [profit margins] on some eco-friendly materials to meet motivated customers half way. I think green costs more mostly because the volume isn’t there yet. As demand for green materials increases, the prices will come down. Biodegradable foam board used to be dollars more per sheet but last time we priced it, it was less than a dollar more,” said Chamberlin.

Chamberlin remains realistic about the limited appeal of sustainable products in a competitive market.

“Greener solutions are mostly an added bonus in the eyes of our customers, except for two – a coastal conservation nonprofit and ATA. I don’t think any others stay with us because we offer greener options.”

She does allow, however, that some customers were initially attracted to Riverworks because of its eco-friendliness.

And sometimes, being green saves money. Riverworks reuses every bit of packaging. “We send out scary looking boxes sometimes, so we have a little sticker that says ‘excuse my appearance,’” said Chamberlin.

The future

“We have things that we just can’t get around right now,” lamented Chamberlin. “Still, we have looked for ways to recycle things that people said were not recyclable, even [polystyrene](#).”

“There are new products coming out all the time. Some of the recycled paper products are actually cheaper than using raw materials,” said Jeff Cutter.

“We’re always seeking better ways,” said Chamberlin, “For me, Riverworks comes down to working in an environment that gives me a sense of worth and purpose. We actually refocus and reposition ourselves to keep up with the evolving world. Now there’s a novel idea, huh?”

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