

Mt. Hood Solutions makes commitment to being green

by Jonathan Brinkman, The Oregonian
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Tom Mulflur, owner
of Mt. Hood Solutions



Tom Mulflur worked for accounting firms after graduating from college but always knew he wanted to own a business. He got his chance in 1995, acquiring Mt. Hood Chemical, a provider of cleaning products to restaurants and other institutions. It had started in 1901 as Mt. Hood Soap and Soda Co.

The new business owner moved his company into a “green niche,” specializing in products that use only ingredients that break down quickly and safely. To reflect this orientation, Mulflur changed the company name this year to Mt. Hood Solutions.

Next week, the company will complete its move from a 50,000-square-foot building in Northwest Portland to an 85,000-square-foot building on North Lombard Street in North Portland. The new facility’s roof is built to capture rainwater runoff, which is filtered and used in production, and the building has extra insulation and energy-efficient lighting. Mulflur estimates that adding the environmental features cost \$250,000.

The company reuses containers, drums and other materials; has a plastics recycling program; has converted forklifts to electricity; powers its delivery trucks with biodiesel; and is converting its vehicle fleet to hybrid. The company employs 110 people, with 45 at its Portland headquarters and the rest in its distribution region: Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Northern California and northern Nevada.

We asked Mulflur five questions, editing his answers for clarity and brevity:

Would you have moved now if you had foreseen the current economic meltdown?

We’d been planning this move for four to five years, and once you get to a certain point, you can’t turn things around. But if I had known what was going to happen, I would probably have deferred the move. We’ve got uncertain times we haven’t seen since the Depression.

How well do you think your company will weather the next few years, and, in general, what will the economic slowdown mean for small businesses in Oregon?

We are a basic business, so while we don’t get all the benefit of large upticks, we are insulated from downturns. Still, we will lose some revenue from hotels and restaurants whose revenues will be down. All our customers will be affected. In this economy, potential customers will be looking carefully at costs.

I don’t think there is anybody who would say there won’t be some small businesses that won’t be here at the end of this cycle. It’s going to be a rough ride for all of 2009 and into 2010. We’ll just have to batten down the hatches.



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How important to your company's sales is the fact that it positions itself as green?

More and more every day. Our commitment is to push being green. If you think it through for your organization, you can make it work for everybody. You can make it work for your environment, you can make it work for your customers and you can make it work economically. And that's the way people have to start thinking about it. As businesspeople, it's not something to push away, it's something to embrace. You have to change your thinking a little. We've changed our thinking, and in the end we've become more efficient, and we're doing the right thing.

How much more does it cost you to use ingredients that have a lower environmental impact than conventional ingredients?

There's a slight premium today -- perhaps 5 percent -- but the premium is becoming less and less.

Do you believe the economic slowdown will change the price/green calculus made by your customers?

Unfortunately, temporarily, yes. We're trying to get our products to the price level where it doesn't make any difference, but when people are trying to save their jobs or their business, they make decisions a little differently. We have to make it so they can do both, and that's our objective. It's really close to being that customers won't have to make that decision.