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CLOSE-UP: MARK CANAVARRO

Cubicles division connects suppliers with firms seeking eco-friendly office gear

By BRIE IATAROLA, Special to the Daily Transcript
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Calling cubicles a danger zone may sound extreme, but Mark Canavarro knows a dirty secret: Many of these workspaces contain pollutants that are harmful to the environment and people's health.

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As president of Vista-based **Cubicles Office Environment**, a.k.a Cubicles -- a cubicles supplier that also provides custom office solutions and systems furniture -- Canavarro first heard about the perils of toxic furnishings last year while collaborating on a sustainable-design project with **EDAW Inc.** When the environmental planning firm's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) coordinator asked Canavarro, 42, how much formaldehyde the cubicles' surfaces contained, he was not sure how to respond.

"I had no idea (manufacturers) used formaldehyde or other VOCs (volatile organic compounds)," he admitted.



Mark Canavarro

After conducting an informal analysis, Canavarro said he discovered that "for 150 cubicles in the project, there were 450 surfaces, which meant everything underneath the laminate and the materials inside this medium-density fibreboard were potentially hazardous to your health."

Having spent the first eight years of his career sitting in a cubicle, the realization alarmed the furniture industry veteran, and he immediately began researching chemicals and their detrimental impact on employees and the planet. He read the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Introduction to Indoor Air Quality" report, which indicated office furniture manufactured with glues released various toxins, including formaldehydes and aldehydes. Among the serious long-term effects, several particular VOCs -- organic chemicals that become a gas at room temperature -- triggered respiratory illnesses, cancer and central nervous system disorders. Studies also linked them to birth defects in fetuses and air pollution.

"That's the point when I started to put the idea behind Green Office Projects," Canavarro said.

One-stop green shop

Determined to bring the idea to fruition, Canavarro explored the definition of an eco-friendly cubicle environment, focusing his attention on five fundamental areas of the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED program. They included sustainable site development; water savings; energy efficiency; materials selection; and indoor environmental quality. He also learned more about the Greenguard Environmental Institute's tests, one of which determines indoor air quality by measuring the level of toxins in building materials, furnishings and finish systems. Manufacturers must pay a hefty premium to obtain and retain their Greenguard-certified labels.

Armed with extensive data, Canavarro scoured the market for Greenguard-certified products, eventually launching Green Office Projects, an "inside division" of Cubicles Office Environment that represents various eco-conscious manufacturers and distributes their products. In essence, it serves as a one-stop shop for businesses that want to purchase Greenguard-certified office equipment and cubicles, but have no desire to deal with a multitude of manufacturers to fulfill their sustainable-design needs or LEED requirements.

"I do a lot of research and reading about LEED certification," Canavarro said. "I can talk to you about what makes (the product) green and what makes it better for you. I can walk you through the process about why it's a good idea and what the benefit is to you as a business. ...We picked out the best manufacturers -- the ones we thought offered the best value,

best line (and) best spread of the products."

So far, the business community's response to Green Office Projects has been positive, Canavarro indicated. Between 2005 and 2007, Cubicles' overall revenue jumped from \$1.8 million to \$4.3 million, a 205 percent increase that made it one of San Diego's fastest-growing privately held companies. Although earnings this year are down approximately 20 percent due to the sluggish economy, Canavarro said the company has offset losses by undertaking government work and expanding its market segment with Green Office Projects.

"We're starting a sustainability program," he added. "We have all this furniture that's been in storage. We want to be corporate-responsible. We're trying to get into remanufacturing."

Additional goals for the division include expanding the client base and educating firms about products that will minimize their carbon footprint and keep employees healthy. He and his crew also want to offset the expenses that companies face when converting an existing structure into a green facility.

"We get deeper into the 'cubicle' end of it," Canavarro said. "There are so many different manufacturers. It's a very difficult product to work with. I wanted this to be very simple."

Simple as Green Office Project's objectives may be, Canavarro knows going green poses a financial burden for some businesses. Despite a potential 3 percent to 7 percent increase in initial costs for particular projects, the return on investment is worth it, he said.

"Just on the furniture end of it, it's not going to cost them more money," he added. "It all goes back to educating our clients. ... We can take high-quality furniture to begin with and use their core material. Our cost of raw materials is between zero to 3 cents on the dollar, which means it costs us less to remanufacture a product."

For firms that want to go green but cannot afford to give their building or office space an environmentally friendly makeover, Canavarro suggests they start by reducing their electricity demand and water consumption.

"Lighting consumes the bulk of electricity," he said. "Look at ... the amount of watering you do for planting in the company, lighting controls and temperature controls."

And for skeptics who think the green movement is just another scam that preys on the paranoid, Canavarro sees no harm in striving toward a corporate culture centered around environmental responsibility.

"Sustainability is something we need to work for -- not just for now, but for the future," he said. "It's not costing businesses anything. It's going to save them money on their office furniture and save them money in the future."

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