



BUILDING A GREEN FACILITY

THE DEVELOPMENT OF VANCOUVER SELF STORAGE

by Elizabeth McLaws

When Ralph McLean of Vancouver, British Columbia wanted to utilize a portion of his 2.5 acre commercial property for a self-storage business, he had the beginning of an idea. He wanted to use steel shipping containers for the storage units. He had the land, he had the concept, now he needed someone to nurture his idea and expand the vision into a viable business. Enter Tami Reilly, a marketing consultant working for one of his tenants on the adjoining property. Feeling it was a good fit, they agreed to work on the project together, but with one pro-

vision: Reilly wanted the company as sustainable and as environmentally friendly as possible. In Reilly, he found a sustainability champion.

“Being an old construction guy, I just thought it would cost more and cause delays,” says McLean, the owner and developer of the site. It was logical thinking for a man whose background was in structural engineering, construction, and consulting. In many ways he was right, but Reilly’s vision for building a “green” business proved that, although it may not be the easiest way, in today’s environment, it was a logical route.

“Shipping containers have a bad image of being stacked and rusty eyesores. I had to find a way to detract from this perception while highlighting their advantage of being a sustainable building choice great for storing things, and to create a profitable business from it. Ralph was willing to give me a chance to prove it could be done,” says Reilly.

And it wasn’t easy. Reilly had no previous experience in sustainable projects. She had to convince McLean it was economically feasible. Then she had to be firm about her wishes with the trades people at almost every turn.

The resulting operation showcases both vision and business acumen. By focusing on green building materials, and then reaching 90 percent occupancy twice as fast as the industry average, Vancouver Self Storage now boasts bragging rights for its unconventional approach. Ultimately, nearly every choice made during construction benefitted the environment, the bottom line, or both.

The office was constructed from two shipping containers joined together. South-facing, double-glazed low E windows and a skylight allow for natural light and heat from the sun, thus reducing electricity use in the office. Rielly says, "On most days the natural light is sufficient for work. We rarely flick the switch." The radiant-heated floor of slate tiles is an attractive modern option and uses 30 percent less energy than baseboard heating. Bamboo plywood, brand named

"Plyboo," is a renewable resource that was cut for the cabinets and countertop. Although Rielly purchased paint with no VOCs (volatile organic compounds), the painter didn't like the choice for the ceiling and used what he had in his truck instead, thereby rendering the results only half "green." The extra cost of a dual-flush toilet was justified by its water saving potential.

A small, unused triangle of the property was turned into a garden where Rielly is growing vegetables for donation to the food bank. Coffee grounds and office lunch scraps are composted on site for use in the garden.

While most storage businesses are built on concrete with paved driveways, Vancouver Self Storage dug trenches under each container to catch surface water, allowing it to drain into the ground and reducing the volume of water entering the city's storm system. A pleasant bonus was that birds

began using the space under the containers for shelter.

The novel aspect is that no actual building was constructed on the site. If the business were to wrap up and close its doors—or even move its operation—nothing would be left on the site other than the security gate. "We would leave virtually no footprint," says Reilly.

The Lego®-like aspect of shipping containers allows you to start an operation with much lower capital costs than building a facility that could sit under occupied for years. Vancouver Self Storage started with 20 containers and added more as customers filled them up. Currently there are 126 containers with land available to add 20 more, allowing capital expenditures to be made out of cash flow.

Here are some of Reilly's tips to help your business build a green office or adopt a greener approach:

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- Do some research. If you don't know where to start, start by looking into your options. Reilly found government subsidized resources to help her develop a plan and identify areas to focus on. Do your product research online, and then call the manufacturer to see who carries their line locally. There are more choices available than can be found in Home Depot® or carried by your local contractor, and American ingenuity is creating new products every day.
- Have your facts and figures ready when presenting to decision makers. At \$400 per toilet, a dual-flush (three liter/six liter) model is twice the price of a regular six-liter, low flow toilet. But how much does three liters per flush add up to in water cost savings? Knowing the facts can not only save the environment, but save your business money!
- Know your building code. Tradesmen will often cite the building code as an excuse not to try something new or unproven.
- Be clear with tradesmen. On your purchase orders, specify the brand names of products you want to use and indicate "no exceptions;" otherwise your trades people, in order to save time or money, may substitute non-green products for your job. Make sure they are on board with your decisions and understand why you made them. Not everyone has adopted green business attitudes.
- Re-use materials. Rather than buying new, find a new purpose for scrap materials or even furniture. Leftover bamboo plywood destined for the scrap-heap was used to create an amazing countertop. Discarded metal became the counter mounts for the bathroom sink. Gently-used, matching desks and chairs were found for the office staff.
- Visit a Re-Store in your area. Run by Habitat for Humanity with locations across North America, Re-Stores get donations from most big chain stores and other contractors of used, discontinued, or leftover construction material and sells them way below retail.
- Incorporate green products as part of your decorating scheme. Examples from Vancouver Self Storage are the use of bamboo for its grainy texture as a design feature on the cabinets and cupboard wall, the slate floor sans baseboards for a cleaner line, and the use of the skylight to achieve a bright, airy feel to the space. That way you can offset the pricier green product with savings in your decorating budget. Vancouver Self Storage is also planning to incorporate a "plant wall" in their office decor, instead of buying artwork.



- Be cheered by all your choices. There are so many green alternatives now that if one doesn't suit your needs or budget, there is likely another option that will. Vancouver Self Storage researched three insulation alternatives to the pink stuff, but only one worked with their space restriction and budget.
- Think outside the flower box. Landscaping your property doesn't have to be the traditional green grass and geraniums. Plant veggie beds instead of flower beds or plant vegetables

and herbs between your flowers. Clients and staff at Vancouver Self Storage are encouraged to take home a handful of cherry tomatoes and fresh herbs as they pass through the gates. In the fall, you can donate the harvest to a food bank.

- Going green needn't mean extra expense in the long term. Taking a holistic view may drive revenues by creating a positive image in the minds of your customers, not to mention staff productivity and retention.

- Get your message out there, but be careful not to generalize too much. Tie the message to things you've actually done so customers can look at your business and make up their own minds based on factual information. Be transparent and genuine about your commitment.
- Don't give up if you run into a wall. Remember that ROI (return on investment) can accrue from a green investment as it did for Vancouver Self Storage. It's bottom line accounting for a green era. To quote President Obama in his inaugural speech, "What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility." 

Elizabeth McLaws is a sales and marketing professional based in Vancouver, BC, Canada. She enjoys writing in her limited spare time and relishes the sight of a full recycling box.



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