

# SELF-CONTAINED STORAGE

Vancouver storage company uses shipping containers — even for its office — to reduce footprint

## 10 tips to a greener office

Marketing consultant Tami Reilly offers these tips to making your small office more eco-friendly:

- 1 Do your research.** There are government-sponsored resources to help you narrow down your options, and to identify areas to focus on.
- 2 Tailor your approach.** Especially if you have a limited budget, focus on areas that will have the greatest impact on your potential savings.
- 3 Know the facts.** Armed with the facts and figures about cost savings through green initiatives, you may not only save the environment, but save your company some cash too.
- 4 Be specific.** On your purchase order, specify the brand names of the products you want used and indicate "no exceptions."
- 5 Study the building code.** Tradespeople will often cite the building code as a reason not to try something green. They could be right, but sometimes it's an excuse to not have to work with an untried material.
- 6 Showcase green products.** A skylight installed in the back corner of the office not only makes it seem bigger, but the extra light eliminates the need to turn on the office lights most days.
- 7 Visit a re-store.** Run by Habitat for Humanity with locations across North America, they get donations from most big chain stores and other contractors of used, discontinued, or leftover construction materials, and sell them for a song.
- 8 Channel your inner grandparent.** Reuse things. Save things. Think twice before you buy something new. Make do with what you have.
- 9 Plant a food garden.** It's amazing how pretty veggies and herbs can look as part of the curb appeal of a business's landscaping design. (Hint: don't plant in rows, try bunches instead.)
- 10 Compost at work.** Use the results to grow bigger veggies without chemicals.

BY DAWN PALEY

Vancouver's southern edge, down at the base of Granville street, along the Fraser River, is dominated by heavy industry. It feels like a forgotten area of a modern city. Planes traveling to and from the Vancouver airport fly over regularly. The Fraser snakes by, low and silent; the landscape is punctuated by houses.

In the midst of this heavy industrial area, a small storage company is turning the most unremarkable of projects into a model for sustainable business practices, both environmentally and economically.

Vancouver Self Storage opened to the public in 2007, offering month-to-month and long-term storage for a variety of clients. The 20 storage units, made out of converted shipping containers, were snapped up quickly, and plans were made to expand capacity.

It was at that point that Tami Reilly, a marketing consultant, got on board. She saw the expansion of the storage business as an opportunity to move toward a more environmentally conscious set-up. "It's more interesting and fun to work on a project that has a little more to it than just a standard start-up," says Reilly, who now manages Vancouver Self Storage.

She's sitting behind her desk in the company's small office, which is built out of two shipping containers. There's lots of natural light inside, and Cleo, a 14-year-old black lab, lies quietly on the floor, lined up with a sunbeam.

Vancouver Self Storage uses empty shipping containers as long-term storage units, a practice that seems logical enough, but which is far from the industry standard.

Most storage facilities are built with concrete floors and steel walls. In her research, Reilly hasn't come across another storage company that relies exclusively on containers.

"There was no building built, so of course there was no scrap drywall, there was no big machines using gas to put a foundation down, we eliminated a lot of construction waste," Reilly says. Using containers for storage and office space also means that the land can



JENELLE SCHNEIDER/VANCOUVER SUN

Tami Reilly, manager of Vancouver Self Storage has taken several steps to make the company environmentally friendly.

eventually be used for something else should the business shut down.

"What seems to get people interested, when they learn more about this place, is not only that shipping containers are reusable, but also everything we did on top of that to make it as environmentally friendly as possible," Reilly says. The 127 units at Vancouver Self Storage are used by small businesses, folks in the film industry, and people between homes or who have used up all of their space.

"There are also small construction and landscaping companies that run their businesses from our units," Reilly says.

Besides the smaller footprint that comes with using reusable containers instead of building a storage facility, Vancouver Self Storage has broken new ground to green the business.

Instead of planting geraniums, Reilly has planted native species, and food such as tomatoes and herbs. The office is painted with paint that doesn't contain volatile organic compounds, the furniture is second-hand, and scraps from the bamboo used to build the cabinets were used to finish drawers.

Some of those basic measures to reduce waste, toxicity and costs might seem straightforward for homeowners,

but the same isn't true in the corporate world.

"We do it for our homes, a little more than we used to. Why can't we do it for our businesses too?" Reilly asks.

There are 2,800 self-storage facilities across Canada, and the sector is growing. "I've been in the business for 23 years, and when I got in the business, there were maybe 500 or less," says Sue Margeson, director of the Canadian Self Storage Association.

According to Margeson, 85 per cent of the businesses involved in the self-storage sector are "mom 'n' pop" operations with a handful of staff. Vancouver Self Storage has two employees and operates on 1.5 acres of what was previously a vacant lot.

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A recent North American survey of storage facilities indicates that people in the self-storage business are feeling the effects of the economic downturn.

"We will still have that stability, but not the growth in demand we had before," says Mike Parham, CEO of the Parham Group of self-storage development companies. Part of the reason growth isn't expected to spring back if the economy improves is because of over-building in the past decade, according to Parham. As the economy continues to slow down, business models like that employed by Vancouver Self Storage appear to light a way forward: lower capital costs, infrastructure brought in to meet need, and a focus on the environment. The storage containers can be brought in on demand, and sold and reused should demand fall.

Reilly says that she has faced some hurdles in her quest to make Vancouver Self Storage a greener business. She has put together a series of tips that continue to guide her as she keeps working to orient the self-storage business towards a greener future.

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