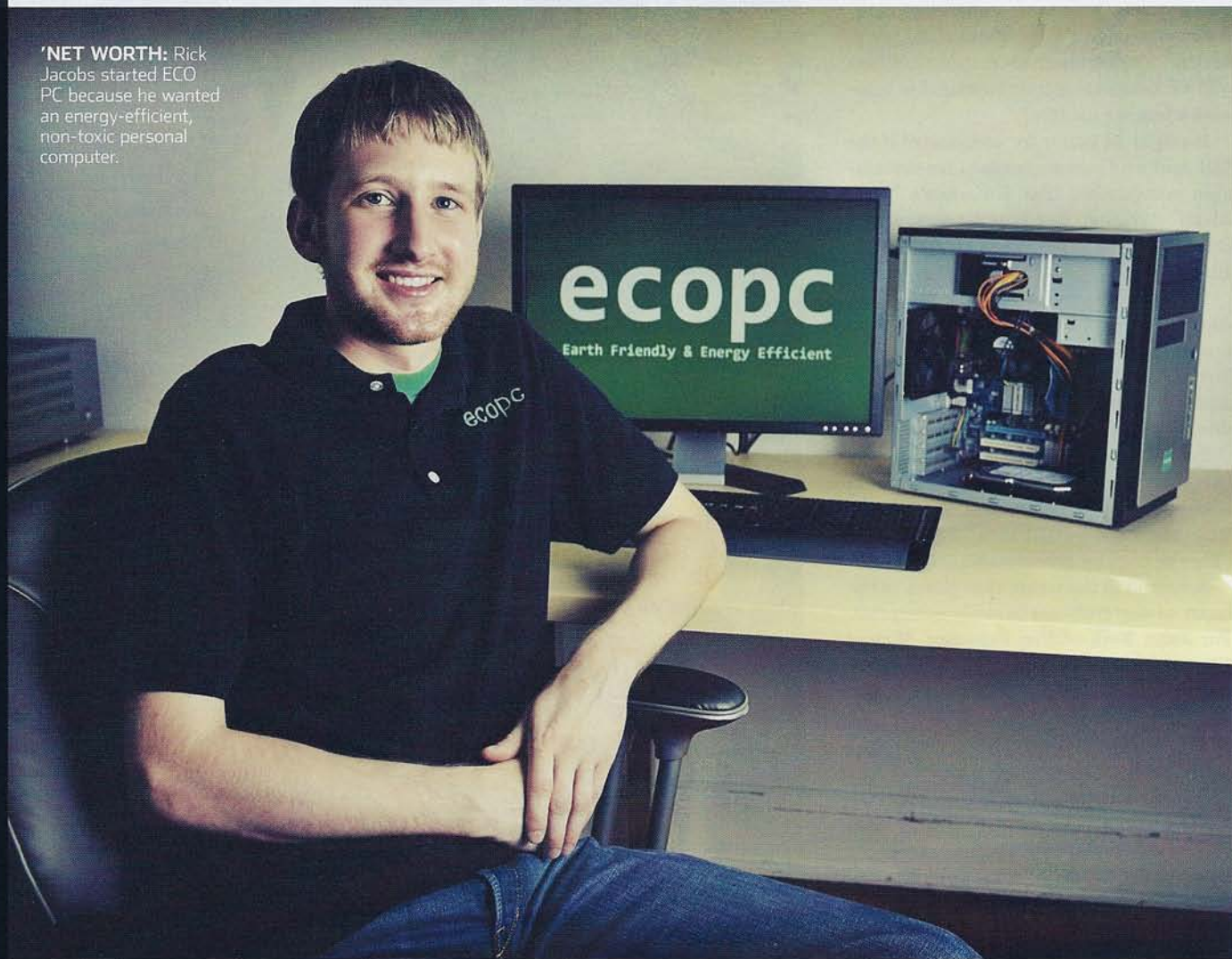


MADISON Business

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'NET WORTH: Rick Jacobs started ECO PC because he wanted an energy-efficient, non-toxic personal computer.



Green Revolution

Hometown eco-preneurs are out to change their industries—one idea at a time

BY MARY ELLEN GABRIEL

ONE-HUNDRED-PERCENT PLANT-BASED PAINTS. Bikes made in sustainable factories. Earth-friendly personal computers. † You won't find them at major retailers—yet. But a growing number of Madison start-ups believes that safe, kind, and innovative products are just what customers—and the environment—deserve. † Rather than follow trends, these “eco-preneurs” prefer to set them. Galvanized by the scarcity pattern in today's economy, they embrace what's known as the triple bottom line: people, planet, and profits. In that order. >>

It's a major paradigm shift with breathtaking possibilities for a better world. But its success depends on us, the consumers. Will we seek out and support the businesses that bring us better products, under kinder conditions? With all the greenwashing going on—companies making overinflated claims about their social and/or environmental responsibility—will we recognize a truly sustainable business when we see one?

It might be easier for consumers if the U.S. had a universal standard for sustainable companies, like Germany's "Blue Angel" eco label. But **Tom Eggert**, senior lecturer at the **UW-Madison School of Business**, says there isn't one.

"Within certain industries there are creditable certification programs, like the wood products industry's sustainable forests label. But right now there's no across-the-board standard. It really comes down to consumers doing their homework."

Yet there are ways to distinguish sustainable companies. One hallmark is transparency. "Sustainable businesses welcome a good, hard look," says Eggert. "They're hurt by greenwashing, too."

A second is the vision that glows at the heart of any truly sustainable enterprise. For **John Beik** of **Eco Painting**, **Wayne Thompson** of **Kind Bike** and **Rick Jacobs** of **ECO PC**, the question is not why, but why not?

Why not offer only paints and stains made from biodegradable raw materials that won't fill a home with noxious fumes?

Why not insist that bikes—the greenest transportation besides your feet—be made under fair labor conditions?

Why not make a personal computer using fewer toxic metals and more energy-efficient parts?

Why not change the industry?

It sounds utopian. It sounds risky. It sounds ... revolutionary.

Meet three of Madison's green revolutionaries.

A simpler design gives Kind Bike room for environmentally friendly innovations, such as tires made using renewable energy and new tools to reduce rubber waste.



KIND BIKE

In the Chinese factories where more than ninety percent of U.S. bikes are made, you can feel the toxicity in the air.

"There's a roughness in your throat, your eyes are running and at night, back at the hotel, you're wiping the blackness out of your nose," says Wayne Thompson, who ran the supply chain for Pacific Cycle for ten years and logged plenty of hours on factory floors in Shanghai.

"The bike industry is not sustainable. The focus has always been on making bikes at the lowest possible cost."

ARE YOU KIND?: "We're not looking to ram green down anybody's throat," says Kind Bike owner Wayne Thompson, who simply thought it was high time bike manufacturers meet fair labor standards and reduce waste.

Thompson is out to change that with Kind Bike, his line of "simple, kind, versatile" bicycles made in China, but under better conditions for workers and the environment.

"Is it more expensive to source sustainable components and use a factory that will agree to monitoring? Sure," says Thompson, thirty-eight. "But the industry needs to go in this direction, and probably will, and I've decided my company will be on board from the beginning."

To stay competitive, Thompson, who earned his MBA from UW-Madison in 2007, intends to run a lean supply chain. A simpler design gives him room for environmentally friendly innovations, such as tires made using renewable energy and new tools to reduce rubber waste (other factories discard as much as half of the rubber used to make each tire).

"We're not looking to ram green down anybody's throat," he says. "We're not green—yet. We put our bikes on ships that burn the dirtiest fuel in the world. But let's show people, here's what we're doing right and here's where we want to improve."

ECO PC

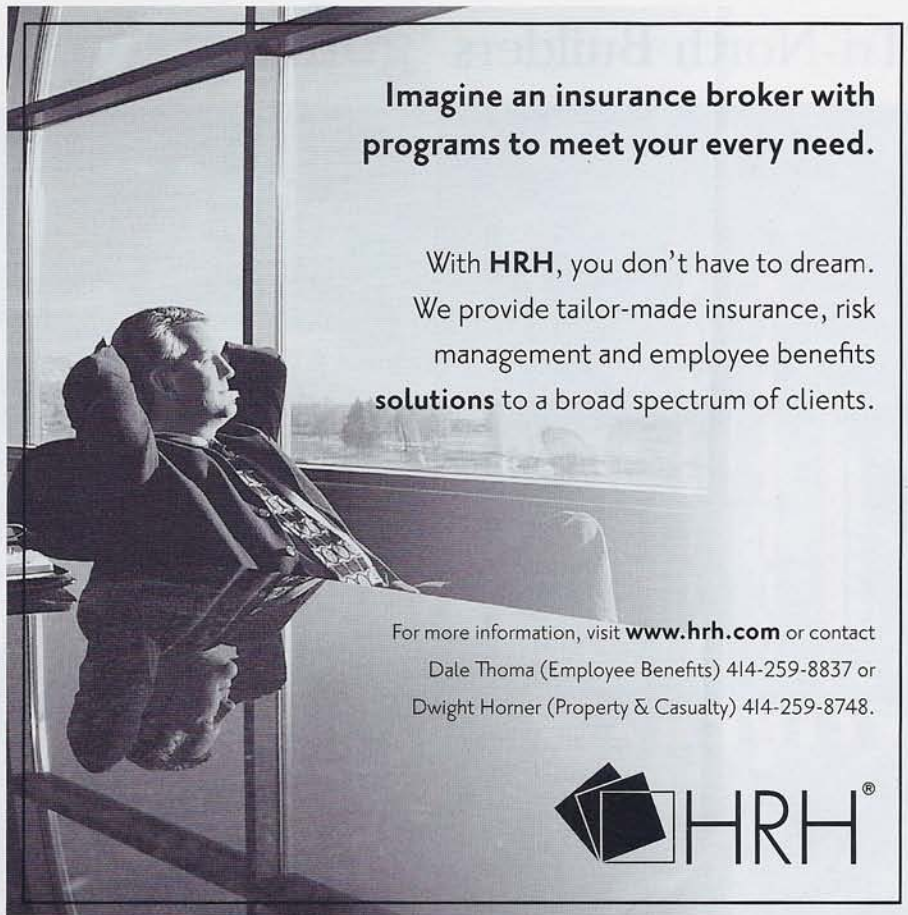
By day, twenty-six-year-old Rick Jacobs is a self-employed computer support provider. By night he is an inventor, tinkering with motherboards and educating himself about the hazards of e-waste. ECO PC is his one-year-old brainchild.

"I built ECO PC because I was looking for an energy-efficient personal computer with non-toxic components and couldn't find one. I figured others might be looking too," says Jacobs.

Designed with a more efficient processor and a cool, quiet hard drive, ECO PC can save users up to seventy percent in energy costs. Jacobs is pursuing Energy Star certification and expects ECO PC to receive the highest rating. But, he points out, that's just half of what makes ECO PC good for the earth.

"The other benefit is the lack of contaminants," says Jacobs. "I plan to be here awhile, and I plan to have kids, and I don't like the thought of land and streams being polluted by toxic metals."


Jacobs is referring to e-waste, which a recent University of Michigan study calls "an environmental hazard that cannot be ignored." Virtually all computers made by companies whose names you'd recognize



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contain toxic heavy metals like cadmium, barium, copper and lead. And only about nine percent of the more than five billion pounds of electronic waste generated in 2005 was recycled.

ECO PC is designed with all ROHS-compliant components, which means Jacobs' suppliers are following Europe's strict guidelines for "restricting the use of hazardous substances" in electronic equipment.

Jacobs sold his first ECO PC in 2007 to **Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition**, which promotes local food initiatives such as "CSA" vegetable shares. Says MACSAC director **Erin Schneider**, "I hope other computer companies are inspired by Rick's ideas."

ECO PAINTING

John Beik remembers the first time he used zero-VOC paint, or paint that is low in volatile organic compounds, as a self-employed painter in his home state of Connecticut.

"I realized we could paint the whole condo and it wouldn't stink," he recalls. "That's when I got technical about ingredients."

The former organic farm worker and Trinity College grad learned that his industry had long compromised worker and client health in return for fast-drying products loaded with harmful chemicals. But alternatives were out there.

"I found that low-VOC was just the tip of the iceberg," says Beik, thirty-two. He launched Eco Painting in 2005, specializing in a wide range of sustainably sourced paints and stains—including one hundred percent plant-based **Auro Paints**, which can actually be composted. One of his first, and now regular, clients was **Arbor House**, the award-winning "eco-hotel" on Monroe Street.

"We are always looking for people to give a little more and do things the right way," says Arbor House co-owner **Cathie Imes**.

Beik sometimes spends hours educating clients about options and knows that opening minds takes time. Recently, though, he cut Yellow Pages ads from his already emaciated marketing budget.

"It's hard being steadfast," Beik admits. "People tell me, 'You're ahead of your time.' But I say, why prolong the changes that are possible today?"

With three small children and a wife who's an herbalist and a doula, Beik has another powerful reason to stay the course.

"Eco Painting completes the circle," he muses. "My kids will be able to say, 'My father really tried to make a difference.'"

Mary Ellen Gabriel is a Madison-based freelance writer.



Don't Get Greenwashed, Get Informed

"There's a fine line between businesses who see the green movement as something they can capitalize on, and the ones whose sustainable values are part of their DNA," says **Jim Armstrong**, head of **Good for Business**, a Madison marketing firm that works only with values-driven businesses.

To find out if a company at its core is trying to do the right thing, do your homework.

"It's just like politics," says Armstrong. "An enlightened citizen helps democracy flourish. Well, an informed public makes for a healthy marketplace."

These five websites keep a close eye on sustainable business trends, offering hope for a greener future.

■ Environmental Capital

The Wall Street Journal's daily analysis of "the business of the environment." blogs.wsj.com/environmentalcapital

■ **Green Biz** How to align environmental responsibility with business success, with daily news and feature stories, case studies and links. greenbiz.com

■ **WorldChanging** Easy reading about smarter living opportunities. worldchanging.com

■ **Grist** E-zine with an unvarnished take on who's doing right and what's going wrong. grist.org

■ **Patagonia** The outdoor retailer is a model of sustainability. patagonia.com (click the "Environmentalism" link.)