



Sustain Dane Newsletter

On Economic Development and Sustainability

Rain Barrels

A Venture into Community and Social Entrepreneurship by Scott Lynch



In the past year, you may have noticed that we are talking less about "Sustain Dane's rain barrel program" and more about "RainReserve." That is a conscious effort on our part as we work to expand the reach of the program out into the world, beyond Dane County. We believe we are well positioned to deliver a product that reflects a new business sensibility-- a product that not only promotes sustainable behavior, but also embodies a business approach that is rooted in sustainability

Perhaps our first indication of the projects potential on a larger scale came in the spring of 2008 when the City of New York called to inquire about partnering with Sustain Dane to do a pilot rain barrel program. However, from a strategic sustainability and business standpoint, our kits were designed to significantly reduce both shipping costs and transportation footprint associated with other rain barrel systems. You see, the 55 gallon plastic barrels used in tandem with our kits, are available worldwide as a waste product.

In recognizing this fact, we knew that we could create a program that literally takes trash from someone's local community and gives them a way to put it to use as a tool that has positive environmental impact. We recognize that this requires a little more work from the consumer, so we've put a search engine on the website that helps people locate surplus barrels near where they live. It's really a triple-benefit: they are using waste as a resource, they are engaging in pro-environmental behavior, and they are saving money, because shipping rain barrels is really expensive. Now that's what I would call a sustainable business!

Though we didn't just stop there, not only does it perform better than any comparable product, it is also far more sustainable in design, manufacture, and packaging. I'll put in a small product plug here, as it makes a great holiday gift for anyone who wants to make a difference for the environment, and there is no question that any gardener would love one.

For those who have not seen the latest version of the diverter, it has come a long way.

RainReserve truly is on the cutting edge of the green economy. Every step of the way, the product team made important choices that add up to what is by far the most eco-conscious system on the market. For example, the diverter itself is made with 50% renewable plant-based plastic made from corn. This is perhaps most technologically advanced use of corn plastic we have seen, and we put equal care into sourcing all the other parts for the kits. Everything is US-made, for example, to keep the carbon footprint to a minimum. We made extensive use of recycled/recyclable materials in both the kit parts and in the packaging, such as the plumbing fittings, which are made not of environmentally questionable PVC (the easy choice), but of recyclable polypropylene (#5) plastic. We are constantly watching for emerging alternatives that will further enhance the sustainability of our supply chain.

Moving forward, we have a two-pronged strategy. First, we'll use our experience and connections as a community organization as a springboard to connect with public and private organizations and municipalities to offer a program much like what you have seen here in Dane County. At the same time, we'll be working aggressively to place RainReserve products in hardware stores, garden centers, and green-products retailers as a way to expose the concept and the product to a whole new audience.

Ultimately, we have three goals for the RainReserve program. First, we want to provide a stable stream of revenue in these tough economic times that will allow Sustain Dane to continue to have an impact in our community, and increasingly, on a larger scale. Secondly, we seek to provide individuals with a low-cost actionable step they can take to make a difference where they live. Finally, we want to serve as a model for other businesses who might need some assurance that a values-driven business approach can be successful. We have a long way to go before we can claim success in all three objectives, but we hope someday that everyone who has participated in the RainReserve program, whether as a volunteer or as a rain barrel owner, can look back with pride at everything that was accomplished.