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## Sustainable Group's recycled products are appealing to environmentally friendly businesses

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At his previous company, Brad Hole used to shake his head over the vinyl binders stacking up on his shelves. Hole couldn't help thinking about all those binders ending up in a landfill one day.

Hole, an environmentalist with rain barrels around his house and chickens in his front yard, saw an opportunity to make a product that would appeal to the ecofriendly: the Rebinder, a recyclable corrugated cardboard binder made from locally sourced recycled material.

Seattle-based **Sustainable Group Inc.**, founded by Hole and mobile technology executive Rick Hennessy, now makes an entire line of office supplies for environmentally minded businesses, governments and nonprofits.

Sustainable Group doesn't try to make its products look like traditional office supplies. Its plain-cardboard binders and folders, sold either blank or with custom screen printing, act as a branding tool for green companies, Hole said.

The products' appearance helped Hole and his partner distinguish themselves when they took the Rebinder to their first big trade show in Atlanta about five years ago.

"We stuck out because our stuff is all brown," Hole said.

That flagship product, the Rebinder, was the first of a new line of office supplies for the ecology-minded, which now includes binders, folders, CD holders, notebooks, badges, labels and other supplies. Products are sold in bulk quantities online and distributed through retailers such as the **University of Washington Bookstore** and **Goods for the Planet** on Dexter Avenue at Mercer Street in Seattle.

Sustainable Group now employs 10 people and expects revenues of slightly more than \$2 million this year. Its major clients including Al Gore's Climate Project, the city of Seattle, **Sur La Table**, L.L. Bean and others.

Hole said he landed the deal with the Climate Project after he read about Al Gore's plans to train 1,000 people on global warming. Hole wrote Gore a letter and sent over a box of recycled binder and folders.

"I said if you're teaching this class and handing out collateral materials, it should be our product," he said. "I said this first case is on us, and the next is on your conscience."

The Rebinder is not the cheapest product on the market. For example, a case of 10 two-inch binders sells for \$49.50, with discounts for larger orders. That price of \$4.95 per unit compares with a range of \$3.50 to \$13.50 for a single two-inch plastic binder.

But Hole said the price comes down over time because when a Rebinder wears out, the user can unscrew the ring mechanism, recycle the old cover and replace it with a fresh one, which run from \$1.80 to \$2.75 apiece depending on size.

Jason Edens, a senior buyer for the city of Seattle, which purchases Sustainable Group products through a distributor, said that a Rebinder is comparable in price to a conventional binder by the time you reuse the second or third cover.

And because businesses generally pay more for garbage pickup than for recycling, putting covers in recycling can save money on disposal costs.

Seattle passed a resolution in 2002 to reduce purchases of products that result in the release of toxins, and some conventional binders fall into that category, Edens said. So Sustainable Group products offer a good alternative.

Sustainable Group uses locally produced recycled fibers for products, and manufactures most products at a facility in South Park. The Rebinders are then hand-assembled at **Northwest Center**.

Northwest Center, a nonprofit that serves children and adults with developmental disabilities, has an assembly and packaging division that partners with local business. A work force of about 30 people with cognitive disabilities assembles products for Sustainable Group and other businesses.

"It provides them (the work force) with a paycheck and learning the skills of working on an assembly line," said Karen Hoffman, vice



Photo: Dan Schliatter

Brad Hole, founder of Sustainable Group Inc. of Seattle, with some of the company's recyclable cardboard material made from locally sourced recycled material.

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president of adult services for Seattle-based Northwest Center.

Hole said Sustainable Group has added new products as it got inquiries from customers.

“If we got enough requests we started making it,” he said. “That was our market research.”

And the company is working on new products, such as a pen made of sustainable harvested wood and cotton that looks and feels like plastic.

“Once people are done with them we’ll take the old pens and grind them up and make new ones,” he said.

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