

September 18, 2009

Green database helps firms stay local

Eco-friendly entrepreneurs now have a virtual marketplace to connect with like-minded vendors

By Joyce Hanson

Going green is hard for most companies, but for Brooklyn-based furniture startup EcoSystems Brand, environmental sustainability is the fun part. It's connecting with potential customers and eco-friendly suppliers that's the challenge.

That's why EcoSystems has placed a listing on the Made in NYC online directory. Created as a business-to-business resource in 2002, the Web site gives manufacturers throughout the five boroughs a place to list their products, and buyers a place to find local suppliers. In 2007, the same year EcoSystems went into business, the directory upped the ante by adding a section geared specifically to green products.

Made in NYC is a nonprofit initiative of the New York Industrial Retention Network (NYIRN), the Industrial & Technology Assistance Corp. and the Manufacturers Association of New York City. The directory, whose 795 listings include 83 green entries, can be found at www.madeinnyc.org.

"I think Made in New York is totally critical," said Andrew Personette, executive director of EcoSystems, which uses recycled materials in its furniture. "It's a great way to find out what's actually made here instead of in China."



Ecosystems' Andrew Personette, seen here with his business partner Matt Tyson, thinks it is important to work with New York-based companies with a green focus.

As more consumers demand green products, companies are seeking to reduce their carbon footprint. Along with learning how to make everything more sustainable, from raw materials to production to distribution, these companies are eager to do more business with local suppliers—especially if those suppliers are also going green.

Just this month, the Harvard Business Review published "Why Sustainability Is Now the Key Driver of Innovation," a study which says that, in the future, companies that make sustainability a goal will enjoy a competitive advantage.

"The initial aim is usually to create a better image, but most corporations end up reducing costs or creating new businesses as well," the study finds. "That's particularly helpful in difficult economic

times, when corporations are desperate to boost profits.”

Finding nearby suppliers can be tough in this era of greater-than-ever global imports. So Amanda Kaminsky, a sustainable construction manager working with Bank of America and the Durst Organization, was glad to learn about Made in NYC from contractors who recommended the site.

During the specification process and when working with contractors to source materials, Ms. Kaminsky searches the Web site for local producers. For example, she has done business with IceStone of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, listed in Made in NYC as a green producer of recycled glass and concrete surfaces.

“Made in NYC is one of the only resources around that summarizes local businesses, manufacturers and products,” she said. “It aids in the communication process if the fabrication of material is local. There’s a social aspect that’s lost if the manufacturer is much farther afield. You also don’t have to do a site visit across country, and it saves everybody time. Plus, it feels good to employ people in your community.”

While the Made in NYC Web site was initially created as a business-to-business directory during the post-Sept. 11 economic downturn, green-focused consumers are now using it to buy local, according to NYIRN Executive Director Anne Seifried. To guard against greenwashing—the attempt by some companies to appear more environmentally responsible than they really are—NYIRN staffers vet listings before they’re posted. They look for evidence of certification, written environmental policies and other green attributes.

“The vast majority of manufacturers right now are small businesses employing their neighbors,” Ms. Seifried said. “We can’t produce everything here, but we want to encourage economically viable products that can be made locally.”

Like EcoSystems, fashion startup Restore Clothing in the Garment District uses the online directory. Restore, which started shipping work-to-workout clothing to spas in May 2008, uses Made in NYC to find seamstresses and manufacturing partners for its clothing, made with materials including recycled zippers and fabric made from coconut shells.

Celeste Lilore, who founded Restore with her husband, Anthony, said that even though they’ve yet to see any customer orders from the site, they’ve encouraged their independent designer friends to register on Made in NYC because of its “unbelievable” networking opportunities.

“In the green space, people are willing to try new things and work with small companies that are innovative,” she said. “It’s better to band together, especially in a difficult economy. We would normally [view one another] as competitors, but in the green space, we all read each other’s tweets and Facebook pages.”
