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## Selling less to green more

Changing values help Near West Side manufacturer

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### The Green Scene

In 1972, Syd Weisberg, a chemist and founder of PortionPac, a Chicago-based cleaning supply manufacturer, published "Know It Like It Is," a pamphlet that summarized his views on pollution of various kinds and showed him worried about looming environmental collapse.

"Man has created forces which are hostile to his well being. He must understand how these forces have arisen and how they can be controlled," Weisberg wrote in the introduction. "Unless he alters his conduct and practices in accordance with this understanding, he may come to a gasping halt."

While some of the concerns in the pamphlet ring oddly more than 30 years since its initial publication ("If city noises continue to rise at one decibel a year, everyone will be stone deaf by the year 2000," Weisberg wrote), other concerns expressed in it-about global warming, for example-are now broadly-recognized issues. The pamphlet says the company would follow Weisberg's philosophy in "every phase of our product, program and system."

Few companies distribute environmental manifestos. But PortionPac does, as if it were an environmental activist passing out literature outside a university dormitory. The company tries to integrate environmental values into its business operations. It has contracted with Hunter Lovins, a founder of the Rocky Mountain Institute, one of the nation's foremost think tanks on "natural capitalism." Lovins said PortionPac is winning new business because of its environmental standards.

"PortionPac is ahead of the game," in terms of environmental sustainability, Lovins said. "They've always been innovative."

PortionPac is a 44-year-old privately-owned firm that makes concentrated cleaning supplies and sells them to elementary schools, hospitals, prisons, government buildings and other institutions from an unassuming building at 400 N. Ashland. They employ 51 people. Their products cover the gamut for institutional needs. There is a line of cleaning solutions for mopping, scrubbing, stripping and finishing floors, a solution for cleaning toilet bowls and pots and pans, polishing glass, and freshening the air.

Each product comes in a polyethylene sleeve customers' janitorial staff mix with water to create the cleaning product. The company has about 30 service techs who train staff to use the product correctly. Each concentrate is color coded to an instruction sheet and one sleeve is used for each mix, keeping the usage simple and waste to a minimum.

By concentrating the solution-the company says their formulations are more than 10 times more concentrated than competitors-and packing them in sleeves instead of ready-to-use spray bottles or jugs, PortionPac keeps chemicals and other waste out of landfills.

By the company's estimate, one case of its glass cleaner saves 56 pounds of cardboard and 100 pounds of plastic versus pre-filled, ready-to-use bottles of the same product.



The atrium at PortionPac headquarters.  
Photos by Frank Pinc



Company chief of operations Burt Klein.

"Instead of using a bottle that's filled with 31 ounces of water and one ounce of chemical, you put the packet in the bottle and reuse the bottle," said Burt Klein, the company's chief of operations.

"You use each bottle 500 times, easy. You're not making the solution, or transporting the bottle. You're not transporting water, not heating and cooling storage space or using space to store it," Klein said. "That's the concept and the beauty of it."

While the actual concentrated goo sold by PortionPac is certified by Green Seal, a non-profit group that labels products according to environmental impact, Marvin Klein, a co-founder and president of the company (and Burt's father), said the object is to sell only what a customer needs. PortionPac, Marvin Klein said, actually wants customers to use less of its product, not more. To that end, its sales staff is not paid by a commission on how much cleaning product they sell. No chemical, he said, is safe.

"We absolutely can't stand to see chemicals going into the waste stream," he said. "The point is every chemical that goes into the waste stream is pollution down the line. There are no safe chemicals. The object is to use our products correctly and use as little as possible."

PortionPac tries to build environmental values into its operations in other ways too. Burt Klein said they are purchasing carbon offsets for company cars, for example.

At their headquarters, every effort has been made to create a pleasant working environment. During a recent tour, enough sun came through the winter gray to light a glass atrium and paintings, sculpture and plants that filled the red brick space.

In the warehouse and area where the concentrates are mixed, the company uses radiant heat fixtures that turn on and off. There is natural lighting, and small lamps provide spot lighting for workers. Stacks of cardboard, wood and metal are neatly placed throughout the shop, waiting to be recycled or reused. An oasis of plants sits in the middle of the mixing area.

"The company is not just about the stuff that is made," Burt Klein said.

Marvin Klein, the company president, sees expanding opportunities for PortionPac, especially now that more and more individuals and businesses are demanding environmentally-friendly products. Klein said the company used to hide its environmental sensibility. He recalled being literally carried from a room once during a sales call in the south.

"I started talking like an environmentalist. They thought I was crazy," he said. "I was talking about the whole concept of using things properly and the impact you have on rivers and streams."

That attitude is changing.

"We think the demand for an environmentally-friendly product will grow rapidly," Klein said. "We have one of the most practical systems in the world that can make a change in a basic and huge industry."

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