

Building on sustainability basics

Vancouver-based office-supply business emphasizes social and environmental responsibility

By Nelson Bennett

When Don Mills started an office-supply company in Gastown in 1949, he delivered carbon copy paper, typewriter ribbon and accounting ledger books by streetcar.

It was costs, not his concern his company's carbon footprint, that drove him to deliver by public transit.

Today, Mills Basics Office Productivity delivers its office supplies and office furniture with a fleet of 10 trucks, but the company hopes to retire two of them and replace them with an electric truck and a human-powered cargo trike.

The move is part of the family-owned business' social and environmental responsibility policy.

"To succeed in this business against Staples, we believe we have to be cutting-edge and we have to be doing something different," explained Brad Mills, who took over as CEO when his father retired 10 years ago. "We call it telling a story. We have to make sure we have a good story to tell."

Another chapter of the Mills Basics story is the H.A.V.E. Café (hope, action, value and ethics) – a non-profit social enterprise that helps people from Vancouver's East Side get back on their feet by training them to become line cooks.

Four years ago, when the former owners went bankrupt, Brad Mills and his sister, Janice Walsh, a chartered accountant, took it over and breathed new life into it.

The Mills family subsidized the café for the first couple of years. It is now

self-sustaining through restaurant sales. In the past four years, close to 400 people have gone through the cafés line cook training program.

Even before the Mills family took over the café, it had been providing jobs for people in transition from homelessness to fully employed under the BOB (Building Opportunities with Business) program. Brad Mills estimates 30 to 40 people have gotten jobs at Mills Basics through the program. Several still work for the company.

"Some of their kids now work here," Blair Mills, who is the company's COO, added. "So there are families within the family."

Mills Basics has grown from a one-man office supply delivery company to the fourth largest office-supply company in Vancouver, with 100 employees. The company sells office furniture and school and office supplies. It also has a printing division.

In addition to its headquarters and warehouse at 1111 Clark Drive, and its printing division and warehouse in Vancouver, Mills Basics also has locations in Penticton, Kelowna and Kamloops.

Brad Mills went to work for his dad straight out of high school in 1976. He did everything from sweeping floors and driving delivery trucks to sales, and ended up taking over as CEO 10 years ago when his father, now 82, retired.

Blair Mills took a more circuitous route. He worked briefly for the family business in the 1980s, and then took a degree in administrative management from BC



NELSON BENNETT

Brad Mills (left) started working in his father's office-supply business when he was 18, and his accountant brother, Blair, joined him three years ago

Institute of Technology. He worked for Thomson Newspapers as an accountant and three years ago he returned to the family business as COO.

"We live here, so we have a vested interest in our environment and our city"

- Blair Mills, COO, Mills Basics

"I needed him," Brad Mills said. "We were growing. I know his personality, his strengths and weaknesses. You can go and hire anybody, but it takes you six months or a year to figure out if it works. I knew that Blair was going to work."

The company has grown slowly and steadily over the years, from \$6 million in sales annually 10 years ago to \$18 million annually today.

Blair Mills said working for a company that bears

your own family name is a constant incentive to do your best.

"Your name attached to it and being part of a family is a real positive, because you really take more pride in your work and what you do. That's our reputation."

When he retired 10 years ago, Don Mills did his own succession plan. The business is now owned by a family trust shared among siblings and parents.

Since taking over as CEO, Brad Mills made it a point to have an environmental sustainability policy. In 2007, the company became carbon neutral when it started buying carbon offsets through Offsetters.

But buying offsets doesn't actually reduce carbon emissions, so the Mills brothers decided to buy an eStar electric cargo truck – which arrived three weeks ago – and installed an electric recharging station.

Recently, the company was approached by a group

of young entrepreneurs who started Shift Urban Cargo, which uses human-powered cargo trikes to deliver up to 600 pounds worth of goods in congested urban centres. The Mills brothers decided it was just the kind of thing the business could get behind.

The company's sustainability policy paid dividends when it won the contract to provide office supplies for VANOC for the 2011 Winter Olympics. (VANOC's purchasing policy included a sustainability component.)

"We won the Olympic bid because of what we were doing for sustainability," Brad Mills said. "We didn't win it on price – let's be honest."

But that's not the only reason the company believes in doing its part for society and the environment, Blair Mills said.

"We live here, so we have a vested interest in our environment and our city." ■ nbennett@biv.com

Sponsor's Message

Do you have multiple shareholders in the family?

Do you have a succession plan in place? Do you have clarity between personal and business goals?

As the owner of a business with family dynamics in the mix, these questions are probably ones you've already asked yourself. After all, you want to ensure the success of the company for generations to come. But understanding the needs of all those with a stake in the family business is a huge challenge-making everyone happy even more so.

It's not impossible. Sometimes bringing in an outside resource can help you understand your expectations when it comes to the family, and how they relate to the overall objectives of the business.

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