Triton Logging

Sustainability Is Their Mantra

Triton Logging is a good example of a sustainable business in action. The company not only recovers and sells submerged timber, previously thought to be lost to the economy, but also involves local communities in the process. Triton CEO Chris Godsall made a positive impression on BCom entrepreneurship students this past summer when he spoke passionately and honestly about running a sustainable business.

Sustainability. A word, by its very definition, that sounds like it’s been around a long time. But in 1988 when Chris Godsall was working on a school paper, the spell check on his word processor just beeped every time he typed the word ‘sustainability’. It did not recognize the word.

Speaking from his Saanichton office where he runs Triton Logging Co. Inc., a business that harvests ‘lost’ forests that have been submerged by the flooding of dam reservoirs, Godsall laughs at the memory. “I should have realized what I was in for then,” says Ottawa native Godsall, 36, who has an MSc. degree in Business Ethics and Responsibility from the University of Bath, England.

Sustainability, along with another term coined around the same time, ‘triple bottom line’, have become Godsall’s business mantra. Both terms were conceived by maverick thinker and business consultant John Elkington in the eighties. Elkington believed that financially successful companies that fail on social and environmental lines are companies exposed to inordinate risks.

With previous experience in the field, Godsall went to Bath to focus his studies on emerging opportunities in business sustainability and the triple bottom line. Earlier in Montreal, Godsall started a non-profit meals-on-wheels type business, run by young people that made and distributed 100 meals a day during rush hour for a cost of $3 per meal. He refers to it as an “intensive business practice.” The socially responsible business continues to be successful to this day.

“What I learned from it is that you could train a young person to be engaged in a meaningful experience ranging from a career building opportunity to a character building opportunity in exchange for work that is important to communities and taxpayers,” says Godsall, an infectious optimist.

In 1998, Godsall came to B.C. and involved himself in an industry with a sustainability image problem and a great stake in it—forestry. “Even though there are a lot of businesses in B.C. that remain cynical about the environmental movement,
Chris Godsall, Triton CEO, estimates there are 80 billion board feet of standing timber submerged and preserved under water around the world. Triton’s underwater remote equipment is designed to harvest these sunken forests without the harmful side effects—such as road-building—that accompany land-based operations. The Sawfish, pictured above, can cut a tree every three minutes without disturbing the root system or significantly disrupting the lake bed.
all companies now speak the language of sustainability. B.C. is well positioned to take advantage of these new dynamics because of very hard-earned lessons about sustainability.

Godsall describes sustainability as an exploration of the negative impact of business. “Sustainability is the story of us learning about the saturation of our environmental and social systems. Over the past 30 to 40 years we’ve begun to understand the problem and we are beginning to look at solutions. Business is good at solutions when there are clear market differentiations. There is no limit to the energy, time and money a business will spend to improve their performance if they can make money doing it.”

Dr. Boyd Cohen, a professor with the UVic Business entrepreneurship program, concurs. Cohen has integrated sustainability as a core component of what he teaches in the program. “Sustainability in business terms is about achieving harmony among economic, social and environmental drivers. When executed properly it can lead to long-term profitability. Sustainable-minded companies recognize that long-term profitability can often be enhanced by being a good corporate citizen.” Cohen cites the drop in Nike’s share value that occurred when its labour practices were exposed. “Treating employees with respect and creating meaningful employment opportunities makes it much easier for companies to attract and retain the best of the best. Many firms pursuing sustainability find significant cost savings can be achieved by minimizing resource waste and inefficiencies. It’s for these reasons that we have sustainability built into the core of our BCom and MBA programs,” he says.

Impressed with UVic’s emphasis on sustainable practices, Glen Fraser, 32 and director of operations at Triton, decided to take a leave of absence from Triton to pursue an MBA. “UVic’s entrepreneurial MBA specialization is a world renowned program with a unique delivery,” says Fraser. “The UVic MBA is one of the only schools that offers specific coursework regarding issues of sustainable business, which is a large part of my personal values and also the corporate culture of Triton.”

Triton is a combination of two seemingly unrelated industries: advanced sub-sea equipment and forestry. Triton’s location near Victoria is a natural for linking these two industries. In 2003, after three years of research and design (backed by 35 investors) Triton tested its Sawfish prototype in Lois Lake about 15 kilometres south of Powell River. At the bottom of the lake is a lost forest world. The Sawfish is powered by a 40hp electric motor and uses a vegetable oil based hydraulic system. It packs a 1.5 metre grapple (for grabbing trees) and a 160 centimetre chainsaw.

A small crane situated on a barge offshore is used to lower the Triton-developed Remote Operating Vehicle (ROV) into the water. A ROV operator, utilizing controls and watching a series of cameras, sonar, and global position system monitors, singles out a tree on the lake bottom. The Sawfish gives it a bear hug with the steel grapple, employs a drill to attach one of 37 air bags to the wood, inflates the bag, then cuts the log free with the chainsaw. Once on the surface the whole logs must be placed in a microwave kiln to dry.

Godsall estimates there are 80 billion board feet of high quality, standing timber, submerged and preserved underwater throughout the world.

Triton plans to use the Sawfish at Lois Lake and at least four other sites in B.C. to begin supplying a brand-ed eco-friendly line of certified forest products. Triton’s challenge is in branding this eco-certified wood. Godsall believes that the interesting story behind how and where the wood is harvested enhances the value of the product.

“We are focusing on branding and becoming a regular supplier locally and globally to furniture makers and other value added industries.”

Godsall notes that consumers will always be driven by price and quality, but when all else is equal between two products, sustainability is the tie-breaker.

However, as Godsall notes, “We are going through a phase where we are struggling to create a clear business case for sustainability. This is Triton’s challenge and something we will be spending a fair bit of time, energy and some money on.”

Godsall is up for the challenge. “We believe that anytime we are making a decision to lead on environmental and social categories that we are enhancing the value of our product.”

Along those lines, Triton has an agreement with the Chelsatta Carrier Nation to expand the value of the timber through optimal milling and drying and marketing. “We have partnered with the Chelsatta Carrier Nation because they are an integral part of the community we work in, because they have intimate knowledge about the resource, and because we believe that the extraction of the flooded timber should include economic opportunities for local first nations.”

With the work of Godsall and Triton and a little help from UVic Business, it looks like sustainability will be a word that is with us for a very long time. ac