



## Going green for growth

### Jill Doucette is teaching small businesses how to save the planet and help themselves

Success as an entrepreneur can take many forms. For Jill Doucette, it means building a profitable consulting practice while staying true to her values – doing well by doing right.

And it all started with an empty coffee cup. Or rather, many empty coffee cups.

Doucette, the 2009 winner of the Nicol Entrepreneurial Award, was a second-year biology student at the University of Victoria when she landed a job as a barista at the Black Stilt, a popular independent coffee house not far from the university campus. Although the Black Stilt had a reputation for supporting the local community, Doucette was struck by how much garbage it produced – enough empty cups and other used items to fill four large trash bags a day, all of which wound up at a local landfill site.

“It bothered me that we were throwing out that much garbage,” Doucette explains, “so on my own I just started collecting things and taking them to be recycled. I also set up a place where people could drop off their used paper cups for recycling. Pretty soon our customers got interested and started bringing in stacks of coffee cups from their offices.”

The owner of the coffee shop was initially skeptical about Doucette’s attempts to green his business. “He was aware of the environmental issues, but it wasn’t clear to him that the coffee shop could make much of a difference,” she says. “After we talked it over, though, he quickly got on board.”

Doucette understands why her boss was at first reluctant to embrace the environmentally responsible practices she wanted to introduce. Recycling, after all, isn’t cheap. The Black Stilt now has contracts with three different recycling companies: one for paper, cardboard and glass; another for compostable waste; and a third for items such as soft plastics and foil bags. Total cost to have everything collected and recycled: \$400 a month more than the coffee shop used to pay for conventional garbage pickup.

That’s the downside, but Doucette’s environmental audit also turned up a raft of money-saving ideas. “In terms of direct cost reduction, we’ve cut back dramatically on waste because we’ve carefully analyzed what we use and don’t use,” she says. “We’re more exact when it comes to recipes and we’ve reduced our energy bills. And we realized there was a lot of money to be saved by managing deliveries better – combining deliveries so that our suppliers don’t make as many trips, and improving our delivery schedules.”

Adopting a green business ethic also proved to have significant marketing advantages. Customers began to visit the shop more frequently and spend more money, resulting in an estimated 25 per cent gain in gross revenue per annum. The company’s commitment to the environment also boosted employee morale and reduced turnover, which in led to higher productivity.

Doucette hadn’t intended to start her own environmental consulting firm, but says she “fell into it” when the owners of another local coffee house approached her for advice on integrating green ideas into their business. “That’s when I started envisioning this as a consulting company,” she says. “It evolved very organically.”



## The Nicol Entrepreneurial Award

Doucette founded her firm, Synergy, in 2008, initially intending to target the food service and retail sectors. So far she and her two partners, also both students, have worked with three coffee shops and a hair salon. In future she hopes to broaden the company's focus to address the needs of a wide variety of small and mid-sized organizations. For the moment, though, most of her energies are focused on completing her biology degree. She expects to graduate in December 2010.

“Over time I see the consulting business growing into a social enterprise that will help to radiate positive change in the community,” she says. One possible initiative is a Synergy-sponsored mentorship program that would assist students who want to learn more about sustainable business principles. Down the road she would also like to establish a roster of expert speakers who can help to educate and motivate consumers, educators and business owners on green practices.

Looking back, Doucette says the experience of competing in the Nicol Entrepreneurial Award was a major turning point in the evolution of what is shaping up as a promising business career. “If there's one word that describes it, it would be ‘inspiring’. Simply by participating, I gained confidence in myself and in my abilities as an entrepreneur.

“The whole Nicol experience is a very big part of the foundation of my business now,” she adds. “It increased my profile on campus and in the community, and it helped to establish me in the field as a professional rather than a student. I'm grateful for the opportunities it has given me.”