



BUSINESS IS PUMPING

A business plan that first creates its own market, and then sustains that market through on-going sales and services that increase over time, is a plan that's destined for success. Essentially, in its simplest form, this is the strategy that won Albany based Ecoflow Limited, the Best Emerging Business Award at this year's Westpac Auckland North Business Awards.

Ecoflow is a small specialist wastewater solutions provider, established in July 2007 by wastewater engineers, Karl Sentch and Jon McGettigan, after they realised the need for a low cost solution to the increasing problem the councils face in removing old and failing septic tank systems.

The issue of old septic tanks breaking down and polluting waterways was a common issue, facing almost all of the councils and the consultants that the pair were working with at the time.

This gave them the inspiration to form Ecoflow and to introduce a specialised sewer and wastewater concept to the market.

The technology is a new type of sewer system called "Pressure Sewer" from Environment One Corporation (EOne). It utilises a grinder pump at each dwelling that pumps all the waste off site via a small bore flexible pipe network to a municipal pump station or treatment plant.

Pressure sewer systems have distinct advantages over conventional gravity systems and eliminate all of their problems, at a lower cost.

Ecoflow is the sole New Zealand representative responsible for the supply and maintenance of the system, which they import directly from EOne in the USA.

It was by introducing this system to New Zealand that Ecoflow essentially created a brand new market, as nothing like this had ever been used here before.

"We saw huge potential for this equipment in New Zealand," says Sentch. "It was just a matter of selling it to the councils, and convincing them that this was a good idea."

Initially that was not an easy sell.

"Bear in mind we're dealing with older wastewater engineers who have been in the council for many many years, who are used to gravity

ECO FLOW

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SEWER SYSTEMS



Jon McGettigan and Karl Sentch

systems that have been around for 2000 years, and they weren't too keen on this whole new concept of pressure sewerage," says Sentch. "They couldn't see how it was a good idea."

Fortunately Eone have been around for over 40 years and had a lot of data that Ecoflow could fall back on to prove the merits, so with a little bit of convincing, a couple of the councils eventually came on board and the company secured its first jobs.

"And an awful lot of interest from all the other councils, wanting to see how those first two systems came off, followed."

Fortunately those two systems came off very well, and from there business has snowballed for Ecoflow, to the point where they've currently got over 4000 projects on at the moment and are taking future orders, as well as setting up a second office in Christchurch, where their systems have been granted approval to be used in the rebuild.

Once the councils came on board, Ecoflow were able to focus their attentions on the next level down – the developers – and have successfully won contracts for new development projects throughout the country including, of course, Christchurch.

Ecoflow now find themselves in the enviable position where the law – the Resources Management Act no less – states that an out-dated technology, such as septic tanks, needs to be replaced, and Ecoflow control the market for the replacement.

Virtually every seaside community in New Zealand was built with septic tanks in the 1950s, and they're all going to need to be replaced – rural communities, new developments – the future for Ecoflow looks exciting and it's not an exaggeration.

For a company that established itself in the middle of the world's largest recession since the 1930s, Ecoflow has defied the trend and survived, prospered and exceeded all expectations.

"If this is business during a recession I can't wait to see it when everything gets back to normal," says Sentch.

In saying that, Sentch admits the recessionary environment probably helped in establishing Ecoflow's success, as it gave the company time

to grow organically, taking orders at a pace that Sentch and McGettigan, who were doing everything between the two of them in those early days, could maintain.

"I think if we were inundated with these massive orders straight away, we would have been overwhelmed, but everything happened to just fall into place and it all came together perfectly."

Eventually the company took on staff and bought their own premises in Albany, which they describe as two of the big milestones for the company.

"Taking on staff was a big milestone, finally realising that we could get someone to help so we didn't have to do it all ourselves."

"That, buying our premises and winning our first contract have all been huge."

"Winning our first job was the greatest, it was only small but it was the start."

They've won many more jobs since that first, and they're still self-confessed workaholics, but it's because they're hungry, they're setting tasks all the time. The company has grown exponentially but that's no reason to kick back, there is still a lot more to achieve.

For a small business consisting of only four full-time and two part-time staff, the company has done spectacularly well in a few short years, supplying councils and developers all over New Zealand, from the far North all the way down to Invercargill, and they are responsible now for approximately 95 percent of all pressure sewer systems in the country.

Simply put, Ecoflow are the Pressure Sewer market leaders in New Zealand and a success story for the North Auckland business community. ◀