

# MASS HIGH TECH

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## Getting ahead by designing and building green

The pressure on manufacturers to design and build environmentally friendly products is rising. According to a 2005 U.S. Small Business Administration report, the U.S.

business sector shouldered 65 percent of environmental regulatory costs in 2004, with manufacturers paying an average of \$4,850 per employee. With regulations on everything from proper disposal of hazardous substances to new emissions standards, environmental regulations are a costly reality. How can companies lessen the blow of compliance?



**Eric Blank**

Manufacturing companies should continually be conducting research and be proactive in developing products with

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minimal environmental impact. Going green may seem like a tough proposition for a company whose core products are made from plastic. Yet despite the challenge, research will tell you this is what the market both wants and needs. After nearly a century of companies producing plastic products, more and more are becoming motivated to make a move to green, in part, by feedback from customers concerned about the nearly 200 million pounds of scrap and other environmental effects from plastic

products entering the waste stream annually in North America.

### FROM PETROLEUM TO CORN

Despite what many may think, there are green alternatives for plastic products. One of these environmentally-friendly “plastic” materials is made from nonpetroleum, corn-based polymer sheets. Products made from these corn-based polymers are virtually identical in look and feel to traditional plastic products, and provide all the same convenience. The corn plastic can be used in nearly any traditional plastic application, including gift, membership and promotional cards.

The one objection you may face, however, is the higher cost. Everyone wants to be green, but they don’t necessarily want to pay a premium to be green. Some consumers are used to paying more for green products, however, the green products buyer, for now, represents a limited and restricted market.

### MANUFACTURING A RECYCLED LOOK

One answer to this price challenge can be introducing products made from recycled plastics. Getting these recycled materials up to demanding quality required for the high-end production can be a challenge, however. Anticipate years of research and development, including many manufacturing trials.

One of the biggest challenges faced in producing a viable “green” alternative to traditional PVC is managing the discoloration and small speckles that were left in the plastic mixture from ground-up magnetic stripes. One solution, which may seem counter-intuitive to many exacting product

designers, turns out to be simple; just leave them in. The slight off-white color and speckled look can be viewed by your customers as the recycled “certificate” similar to what is seen in recycled paper products. Most customers like this feature because it conveys their commitment to using green recycled products.

Going green will teach you some interesting lessons. The first is to listen to the customer and try to get out ahead of the market. If you sit back and wait for the green market to mature, you may lose your leadership in what can be a commodity market.

The second is to let the environmentally-friendly product innovations speak for themselves. You do not have to spend vast amounts of money on an extensive campaign to promote yourself as a green manufacturer. In the rush to go green, some companies are using environmentalism to polish their corporate image without developing products that truly support a green mission.

The third is that just being “green” isn’t enough. You’ve got to understand the market and economic drivers and be willing to invest, innovate and expand the definition of what being green can be.

For many companies, going “green” still entails taking on more costs than initially can be realized in savings. If you’re there for the long term, the market will reward you.

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