

Turning green ink to black

InkCycle sees profit potential in environmentally friendly product

BY JAMES DORNBROOK | STAFF WRITER

InkCycle founder and President Rick Krska hopes to create some serious green with the company's latest product.

The product, called "grenk" (pronounced like a mashing together of green and ink), is a line of remanufactured printer toner and ink cartridges designed to be 100 percent environmentally friendly, including the packaging. The product even includes regular reports that tell customers exactly how much material their purchases have removed from the waste stream.

"The good news for us has always been that we've kept ink cartridges from going into the landfill after one use, so there has always been a 50 percent savings," Krska said. "Now, we're saying we want to clean up the rest of that waste stream so there is very little coming out the back end. We're finding there are many companies out there that care about this."

Krska said he was sitting in a café in California when the idea hit him that he could make a difference with a truly "green" product.

Toner cartridges are mainly plastic, he said, but also contain aluminum and steel parts. Recyclers exist for each part but not for the cartridge as a whole. So his idea was for InkCycle to separate the cartridge components.

"We put these together, so we can take them apart faster than anyone," Krska said.

InkCycle collects and recycles the metal and cardboard boxes. It sends the plastic shells of the cartridges to Systech Environmental Corp., where they are ground into fuel pellets for cement kilns used by LaFarge North America.

"As everybody knows, plastic was originally made from petroleum, so it makes a nice fuel for their process," Krska said. "What remains is an ash, and they even use that to make concrete."

InkCycle packages its products in boxes made of recycled cardboard, and instead of packing foam, it uses biodegradable plastic bags filled with shredded paper that comes from the testing process for the remanufactured cartridges. The only piece left is a plastic handle on the box, which also is reused.

Grenk products cost a little more than normal remanufactured ink and toner cartridges, which InkCycle will



PHOTO BY DAVE KAUP (KCBJ)

InkCycle President Rick Krska says the company's new "grenk" line — environmentally friendly ink cartridge and toner products — will clean up the waste stream so "there is very little coming out the back end."

continue to provide, but still costs less than new products.

Joe Runyan, owner of Hangers Cleaners in Kansas City, said grenk is a perfect fit for his company. Hangers advertises itself as Kansas City's only eco-friendly dry cleaner, using liquid carbon dioxide instead of perchloroethylene as a cleaning solvent.

"Since my business has a very similar marketing strategy, I know that the majority of the public will only walk the talk so far," Runyan said. "But if you provide a product or service that is of equal or better quality, it makes it a lot easier on the consumer. Grenk is equal in quality and better in price than buying a new toner cartridge, and the fact that it is green is fantastic."

Nathan Orr, a partner at Spencer Fane Britt & Browne LLP, said that maintaining a green image is important for the law firm's environmental practice.

"Because of the notoriety of our practice, we have clients that reach out to us not only for advice on environmental compliance measures but for sustainability measures," Orr said. "As companies turned to us for advice on sustainable practices, we saw an opportunity to make our own organization more sustainable and lead by example. Grenk plays into that."

Orr said one of the most important things to the firm is being able to measure the effect of buying grenk. The reports on waste reduction make that easy.

Krska said that's exactly why he thinks grenk could end up being 50 percent of InkCycle's business within two years.

"We are now getting companies that have never used an aftermarket toner but are seriously considering grenk because it is green," he said. "It's opening up a new segment of the market that, with only the money savings we offered in the past, I don't think we would ever get there."