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GREEN TECHNOLOGY

UCLA conference spotlights firms' eco-friendly concepts

Start-ups and Fortune 500 companies attend the event hosted by Opportunity Green.



Kevin Krohner, chief executive of IOS Technologies, holds an energy-saving parking lot light at the Opportunity Green conference at UCLA. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times / November 8, 2009)

By Richard Verrier
November 9, 2009

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Every week, Alex Velez and Nikhil Arora collect 2,000 pounds of used coffee grounds from Peet's Coffee & Tea outlets near their UC Berkeley haunts and take them to a warehouse in Oakland.

There, in a damp indoor farm, the college friends grow gourmet mushrooms that are sold at local Whole Foods Markets. Just a few months out of business school, they're on track to make more than \$200,000 in their first year.

The budding entrepreneurs' efforts were among 25 start-ups spotlighted during the third annual sustainable business conference hosted by L.A.-based Opportunity Green in partnership with UCLA's Price Center for Entrepreneurial Studies. The event held at UCLA drew nearly 600 participants, including 45 companies displaying the latest green products and technologies.

"We want to broadcast to the world that there are viable and highly profitable business opportunities that are environmentally responsible," said Mike Flynn, co-founder of Opportunity Green, whose company holds green industry forums around the country.

During the two-day conference that ended Sunday, executives from Fortune 500 businesses and start-ups shared their experiences on developing green products and sustainable practices.

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At the smallest level, there were Arora and Velez, who recycle the rich, dark coffee grounds in place of wood shavings and sawdust used by some mushroom growers.

"We figured, why use wood-based products to grow mushrooms when there was so much wasted coffee grounds out there?" Arora said. "Our goal is to transplant this urban model to every city in America."

At the other end of the spectrum was giant Clorox Co., which last week announced that it would phase out the use of chlorine in its U.S. bleach manufacturing facilities.

"Even a 100-year-old company can not only reduce their carbon footprint, but they can grow by meeting the sustainable needs of consumers and customers," said Beth Springer, executive vice president of Oakland-based Clorox. Springer touted the company's new line of plant-based household cleaners and efforts to reduce energy costs by selling concentrated liquid bleach, among other steps.

Nike executive Lorrie Vogel and Michael Hopkins, editor in chief of MIT Sloan Management Review, described Nike's sustainability efforts, including recycling millions of sneakers into sports playing surfaces.

Despite the recession, green companies continue to attract investment dollars in L.A., which has been trying to build a clean-tech industry cluster to boost jobs and cut pollution.

In the second and third quarters of this year, venture capital firms invested \$335 million in 16 deals involving L.A.-area clean-tech companies, including such businesses as those that sell irrigation controllers and those that make energy efficiency and monitoring systems, according to YouNoodle Inc., a San Francisco company that provides a range of services for start-up businesses.

"There is a huge amount of capital flowing into the green technology space," said Sean Gourley, co-founder of YouNoodle, which helped organize a competition at the Opportunity Green forum to recognize top start-ups.

Among them is HUMAN Healthy Vending, a Los Angeles company that makes energy-efficient vending machines stocked with healthy snacks.

A fitness buff and part-time personal trainer, company founder Sean Kelly got the idea for the business when he was studying at Columbia University and became frustrated by junk food sold in most vending machines.

After 18 months of research, Kelly recently began selling eco-friendly vending machines with LED lighting and extra insulation. He sold 80 this year and expects to sell an additional 1,000 machines in 2010 to offices, health clubs and schools. The machines are built in Corona.

"Our mission is: We bring nutrition to people," said the 26-year-old entrepreneur, whose firm employs 10 people. "I like to say we're making vending machines sexy and cool."

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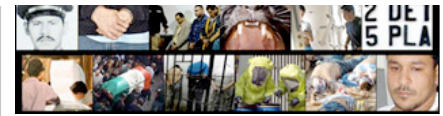
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