

LET'S PUT ON A SHOW

In the wake of September 11, Image 4, a designer of trade show exhibits, saw revenue plunge by two-thirds. That led CEO Jeff Baker to rethink everything—and rebuild his business in a radical new way **BY ELAINE APPLETON GRANT**

The reformed manufacturer

When Baker became CEO of Image 4 in 1989, the environment was the last thing on his mind. The Manchester, New Hampshire, company was a busy photo lab and toxic chemicals were everywhere. The company still prints large-format graphics, and also designs and builds trade show exhibits and interiors for banks, retailers, and restaurants. The 17-employee company scrounges up Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood, reclaimed metal, egg-based shellac, nonvolatile paints, soy-based foam, and other ecofriendly materials. That's helped Baker stand out from the pack. Revenue at the company hit \$3 million this year, with clients including Home Depot and the United Way.

PLAN B In 2001, Image 4 had its best year ever. But after the World Trade Center attacks, the \$85 billion trade show industry ground to a halt. The experience led Baker to take stock. He had grown increasingly concerned about the environment. But he also realized that taking a new, sustainable approach to his products could be a competitive advantage. These displays are printed on recycled Mohawk Brite White paper and mounted on composite board made from sawdust chips reclaimed from wood processing. It sounds expensive, but Baker estimates that the materials added only 12 percent to the project's cost.

Not easy being green

Recycled metal isn't that hard to find. But for this project, Image 4 was forced to use some "virgin"—that is, unrecycled—metal. That's because some recycled materials simply don't perform as well as new ones. It's an inevitable and difficult compromise, but Baker is stepping carefully into sustainability rather than greening his entire production line overnight. Why? "I just don't know if some of the stuff works," he says.

NO VINYL, THAT'S FINAL In 2006, Image 4 created this installation for the Nexus Green Building Resource Center in Boston. The organization had one requirement: no vinyl. This would post serious problems for most vendors; the industry relies on vinyl, which is lightweight, flexible, cheap, and easy to print on. But it's also toxic to those who make it and carcinogenic when burned. Image 4 used water-based inks on these banners, which are made from 100 percent recycled soda bottles using a patent-pending process that took the company two years and \$250,000 to develop. The result: no solvents and no release of dangerous volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, into the atmosphere. The banner hangs from the ceiling on 100 percent Canadian hemp and is supported with an FSC-grade pine dowel.