



PHOTO BY CHRIS YTUARTE.

Karma as a Business Model

*It's Not Easy Being Green,
But It's Worth It*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF 3FORM.



In Salt Lake City, Utah,

a design company called 3form is taking the notion of green (environmentally friendly) sign production to a new level.

From the broadest concepts—farming all-natural signage materials from third-world countries while coordinating with Fair Trade organizations to ensure the laborers get a competitive wage; to the narrowest approach—3form employees are rewarded for recycling their shampoo bottles at the office (which often end up being melded into some type of signage material); 3form employs what it calls a “full circle” karmic approach to its business: what good you do comes back to you, in profits as well as environmental health. Not only is this a unique and refreshing philosophy, it is also applied to create some of the most distinct and unusual signage and lighting designs around.



A quick primer on 3form:

3form, just like any other company, has a CEO. Unlike any other company, at 3form, that acronym often refers to the Chief Environmental Officer.

3form, like many other companies, is located in an industrial park alongside various other businesses. Unlike most other companies, however, 3form employees spend hundreds of hours a year planting trees, gardening, and beautifying its industrial park facility.

3form, with a nod to Wall Street firms required to have a compliance officer on duty at all times to enforce Securities and Exchange Commission regulations, recently hired a full-time “environmental compliance officer” who will guide the company in adhering to everyday eco-friendly practices.

And this writer missed only by a few days 3form’s first-ever company-wide “dumpster diving” endeavor, during which employees would take an environmentally-focussed guided tour of their own giant outdoor garbage bins, in order to educate the staff about what is trash and what should be recycled.

This, folks, is not your father’s sign shop.

Though 3form is technically considered a five-year-old start-up company, its deeper origins offer an odd dichotomy to the extreme green version we see today.

Recall, if you can, the outcry heard nationwide some 20 years ago over the Styrofoam boxes that McDonald’s™ once used to serve the Big Mac. Environmentally speaking, they were the epitome of evil—non-biodegradable, destined to expand American garbage

heaps for generations to come (had they not been eliminated). Those very foam food crates, once maligned as the inevitable downfall of our planet, were designed in-part by a man named Ray Goodson. That same Ray Goodson just happens to be the founder of environmental champion, 3form (redemption be thy name).

Fast forward a few decades, as Ray Goodson’s son Talley joins him to create 3form, a company based heavily on Ray’s patented “Resin Encapsulation Technology” and environmentally responsible production. Today, the company aggressively pursues what it calls the “Path to Zero,” which is described on 3form’s Web site as “the framework which governs 3form’s efforts to become a truly sustainable company; it is both a process for change and a vision for the future.”

Resin Encapsulation Technology caught on quickly. It involved infusing decorative interlayers within environmentally preferred resin to create unique designs for signage and various architectural applications. 3form offers materials infused with Indonesian river rocks that were harvested by workers who had suffered unemployment following the 2006 tsunami that devastated the area. The company has sent people to the Amazon in search of materials, always coordinating with Fair Trade organizations to provide a living wage to the workers. One particular line of products contains real dried flowers fused into the resin; another is made entirely from recycled shampoo bottles.

On site, the 3form production process is fascinating to witness. The first photo

at the top of this story shows workers at the company facility as they meticulously place hundreds of thin bamboo strips onto a resin sheet. This is how all of 3form’s organic products are created. Whether it involves pressed flowers, thatch, grass, etc., there is no automated mass production. Each piece is individualistic; each is an original work. The company’s products are intricate, detailed, and specialized.

“Most big companies speak in terms of pounds and tons,” says Kirby Rea, vice president of sales and marketing at 3form. “We speak in square feet.”

The presses used to fuse two resin sheets together are chemical free, using only heat and pressure. Each can produce up to 16 sheets per run.

The natural, organic themes are part of what Rea calls a “convergence of aesthetics.” He explains that even something as seemingly sterile as a wayfinding sign system now takes on a new notion, as the “warming-up of environments” becomes more popular. “In health care facilities, data shows that natural products help the recovery process.”

Beyond the environmentally conscious products it creates, 3form adheres to all the same rules in running its own facilities. During “Green Week,” employees are educated in air pollution, there is commuter bicycling training, and LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) topics are discussed, just to give a few examples.

The company’s “Greenboard” includes a car-pooling map, a large graph charting the company’s recycling program, and even the current standings in the 3form employee weigh loss contest



(showing that environmental *and* personal health matter here!).

“Action is the antidote to apathy,” 3form’s Web site states. “We set specific, aggressive goals, then rely on the commitment and passion of our people to continually reduce the impact of our activities on the planet. This year, we have set a goal to completely eliminate all contributions to landfills by 2009.”

3form has been creating relationships with likeminded companies for supplies and equipment. Sheffield Plastics Inc., a Bayer MaterialScience company based in Sheffield, Massachusetts, often extrudes 3form resin when producing its own MAKROLON® polycarbonate resin; and a Bayer-designed machine, the Aura™, uses a color infusion technology to help create 3form’s Chroma material by blending the dyes, applying, and drying it. According to Rea, it’s the only machine of its kind in existence, and it resides at 3form. (3form’s solid resin Chroma product is part of what Rea calls the world’s first “leasing” program for architectural materials, in which

a buyer returns the product to 3form after use for recycling.)

Another partner with which 3form is cultivating a successful and beneficial relationship is Nova Polymers, a manufacturer and distributor of photopolymer sign products based in West Caldwell, New Jersey. The company is “proud to be an industry leader as the

When visiting the 3form facilities, one can’t help but be reminded of a karmic lyric penned by The Beatles many decades ago: “And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

focus shifts to ‘green’ building materials in environmental graphic design.” During a recent visit to 3form’s facilities, Nova Polymer’s Director of Sales and Marketing Dave Miller discussed the partnership, which involves bonding Nova Polymer’s clear photopolymer to

3-form’s Varia™ series material to create NovAcryl® ECR™, a sign solution offering custom color, pattern, texture, interlayer and finish.

“Doing business with 3form is inspiring,” says Miller. “Not only are we advancing both of our product lines, but at the end of the day, we feel good about the environmental benefits involved. It’s really a win-win.”

Rea is pleased to see that much of the architectural and design world is not only becoming environmentally conscious, it is also adamant. “If you’re not really in the green world when dealing with architects or designers, don’t even bother showing up,” he says. “And I like that. Look, it’s good for kids, it’s good for the future, it’s good for the environment. And, it’s good for business.”

3form’s mission statement emphasizes one karmic hope: “Someday, the only companies which exist will be those that give back as much as they take, generate as much as they consume, and sink as much as they emit.”

The future is green. b