

# Business model based on frog's instinct

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Since Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* almost half a century ago, the environment—and human abuse of it—has moved steadily to the forefront of public consciousness. Universities now offer Environmental Studies and graduate Environmental Engineers.

The desire to help provide environmental solutions is what prompted businessman Barry Husk to launch BlueLeaf, a business like no other in which he has been involved.

"I was the director of the Dobson-Lagassé Entrepreneurship Centre at Bishop's University a few years ago," says the Drummondville businessman, "and if someone had come to me with the BlueLeaf business plan at that time, I would have sent that person back to the drawing board." (The Centre sees local business people volunteer their time to provide help to start-up and new businesses in the Townships.)

Still, just over one year ago, Husk invested in a lab and started hiring biologists because, as he puts it, "I wanted to do more than just sell widgets."

As he talks about BlueLeaf he speaks of social entrepreneurship. "I hope to eventually make a profit from this business, (and to break even within five years) but the bottom line isn't the only consideration, and not necessarily even the main consideration. It's a different kind of business and a completely new experience for me."

Barry Husk describes himself as a lifelong businessman. After high school, he studied journalism and then photography before turning to administration. He

stepped into management with a floor covering manufacturer and rose to be general manager, responsible for 250 employees. In 1984, with two partners, he bought the company for which he'd been working and for almost 20 years. He ran Multiflor, a manufacturing and distribution company that did business world-wide (although principally in North America). He and his partners acquired and ran several other businesses as well until 2003 when his two partners (a few years his senior) felt it was time to retire. For his part, Husk (who vows he will never retire) remains involved in three businesses (including Bull's Head Beverages and Black Cat Books). With a much-reduced workload, he spent a few years pondering what he'd do next.

The answer was BlueLeaf (or *Feuillebleu*, as it's registered with the *Régistraire des entreprises du Québec*), which he started up in June, 2007. (Were it not for political correctness, the company might well have been named Hot Frog, in reference to a science experiment. A frog placed in hot water will jump out; a frog placed in water which is heated slowly to the same temperature will sit placidly, oblivious to the change in its environment.)

"I began by doing market research," he says with a smile. "I especially wanted to know what was not being done. There are a number of environmental engineering firms out there but they're doing sewer systems and water plants. I started wondering what could be done at the pollution source, and from a biological point of view."

One thing Husk found was that many testing methods used in Europe and else-

where were not being used here in Quebec. "BlueLeaf participated in a study in partnership with the Université de Sherbrooke using a new method of measuring blue-green algae which was faster, less expensive and more precise. The study was published in November and helped establish our scientific credibility."

Another thing he found was that responsibility for the environment was diffused through an alphabet soup of federal and provincial ministries: MAPAQ, MSSS, MAMR MDDEP, MRNF, DOF, as well as other groups like the ROBVO and UPA.

"These same ministries," Husk points out, "are also potential clients for BlueLeaf. We are a service company. We don't sell a product, but rather, we offer our expertise. What we're developing are tools for water management."

At the present time, BlueLeaf has, as clients, a number of lake associations and municipalities. "It's a small but growing clientele," he says. "Our potential clients include the public and para-public sectors." One of BlueLeaf's potential clients is COGSAP or the *Conseil de gouvernance de l'eau du bassin versant de la rivière Saint-François*, an organization which came into existence in 2002, dividing the province into some 33 watersheds (the St. Francis being one of these). One of the things BlueLeaf will bring to the mix is a results-oriented approach. "Often a government organization will convene a meeting to discuss a particular problem. Once the meeting has been held, the organization will consider that it has done its work. In the private sector, where a product or a service has to

be provided, a meeting is only an intermediate step and the work isn't done until the product or service needed to solve the problem is actually delivered."

"At BlueLeaf," notes Husk, "we're focusing on soil and water, which are closely interconnected. Pollution in lakes and streams originates further back in the watershed. For example, dairy farmers will give their cattle anti-parasitic medication or small amounts of phosphorus in their feed. These pass through the animal and end up in the manure which is spread on the land and eventually washed by rainwater into streams and lakes."

"From urban centers, rain carries a different set of pollutants into the watershed," he adds. "Because we put up buildings and pave roads and parking lots, we render the soil impermeable. Water doesn't soak into the ground, but runs off the pavement and in doing so picks up contaminants (asphalt is oil-based) and heat, so that the temperature of streams and lakes ends up rising."

"And," he finishes, "even if we stopped feeding phosphorus to cows and ripped up the asphalt, we'd still have to deal with the 'internal load' of our lakes, that is, the pollutants that we've been flushing into them for the last 60 years or more and that settled to the bottom."

BlueLeaf, for the present a small four-person operation, may not yet have all the solutions (although it's compiling a list of recommendations), but we should all hope that Barry Husk's business model for the environment bears fruit. As a society, we continue to bear a disturbing resemblance to hot frogs.