

# green entrepreneurs



## Joel Hirshberg, Green Building Supply

by Mallory Smith and Elizabeth Brown, M. Smith and Co.



**Products.** Sells environmentally-friendly building products to local market and nationwide

**Business Started.** 1991

**Location.** Fairfield, Iowa

**Motivation.** "It's a labor of love. It's been that way since day one."

"I'm a very organic person," says Joel Hirshberg, owner of Green Building Supply, an environmental home supply store located in Fairfield, Iowa. "I just take it one day at a time on projects so they can grow naturally." For Hirshberg, taking it one day at a time, with his characteristic no-nonsense approach, for the past 19 years has produced results. Green Building Supply has grown from a one-room operation that supplied green building products to the Fairfield community, to a storefront in the city center and a warehouse that ships materials to home builders and businesses nationwide.

Reflecting on how the business began, Joel says, "I didn't have any interest in building at first, but my wife got into designing our house, which was no small undertaking." In fact, Joel and his wife, Joy, spent seven years of research before building their uniquely designed Frank Lloyd Wright style home in Fairfield. The design incorporated principles of Vedic architecture, a system of planning and building in accord with Natural Law that requires, among other things, the use of safe and environmentally friendly materials. The process of researching and traveling throughout the U.S. to find the necessary sustainable products to build their home—which were hard to come by locally in southeast Iowa twenty years ago—led to the birth of Green Building Supply.

### Green Home to Green Business

"Everyone wanted to know how we built our house and where we got the natural materials. Sourcing products without toxins was very difficult without the Internet," Joel recalls. Pretty soon, the Hirshbergs decided to make answering these questions their full-time job. "We became dealers of several products and it just kept snowballing." Becoming a dealer in Iowa was relatively easy as Joel explains, "Iowa happens to be one of the last places new products get established."

While Joel says the Midwest was lagging behind in the green movement at the time, Fairfield proved fertile ground for the Hirshbergs' business plan. These days,

## *“I’m a very organic person,”*

Fairfield, home to the Maharishi University of Management is the self-touted Midwest Mecca for sustainable living. “One reason for our initial success was that we lived in a community where 3,000 people practice meditation, eat organic food and are pre-disposed to things that are natural,” he explains, “if it weren’t for consumers of this sort, we never would have been able to start off so humbly.”

### **Iowa Sun, Rain, and Snow**

When he and his wife started Green Building Supply, Joel didn’t know the first thing about the harmful chemicals present in traditional paint, caulk, and other solvents; but over the years, he has collected a wealth of knowledge in the field of green building products. Not only does Green Building Supply test many of the products they sell, they often follow-up with customers to find out how their products are holding up over time.

Even the Hirshbergs’ own home serves as testing grounds for many products. In fact, if you look at their house right now, you’ll see 12 to 15 boards of cedar and pressure treated wood, stained or sealed with six or seven different products, leaning against the fence. “My methods are simple. I put it on and let it sit in the Iowa sun, rain and snow for a year and see what happens.” The ‘practical research’ that goes on both at the store as well in the Hirshberg home has become somewhat of a modus operandi for Green Building Supply.

### **Relying on Experience**

“We have friends who are environmental consultants with meters that can scientifically test things, and many of the products we test have a green label or a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS). But a green label or ‘safe’ MSDS sheet is not enough. Ultimately, I give new products to our own volunteers”<sup>1</sup> Some of Hirshberg’s chemically sensitive customers, whom he refers to as his special ‘canaries in the coal mine’—people he happens to know in the community that support what Green Building Supply is doing—have volunteered to become his first line of defense for testing the toxicity of many self-labeled ‘green’ products. If the ‘canaries’ give him the green flag, then he knows he can go to the next step, which is to test the performance

***Hirshbergs’ own home serves as testing grounds for many products.***

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<sup>1</sup> Materials Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) are designed to provide workers with information about proper handling or working with a particular substance.



of the product. “It’s certainly better than relying on green labels, which do not guarantee that the product is safe.” Furthermore, Joel says that these green labels may satisfy governmental standards, but that commercial and industrial standards were never intended for homeowners and are usually far below the standards set by European communities.



Aside from relying on the experience and senses of valued customers and friends, Joel claims to know exactly what questions to ask of a manufacturer and how to understand their answers. “I know how to get to the bottom of it,” Hirshberg firmly states. His confidence in the business comes not only from his critical attention to the products he selects and the manufacturers he buys from, but also from his employees’ knowledge of the products.

### **Intellect Meets Experience**

“If you go to any of the big box stores and ask, ‘What’s in it?’ What kind of answer do you think you’re going to get?” asks Hirshberg. At Green Building Supply, staff training is intensive and on-going. “There’s both an intellectual side and an experiential side.” Joel urges his employees to get as much hands-on experience as they can. In fact, Green Building Supply recently donated 1,200 square feet of Forbo Marmoleum flooring to a local non-profit radio station and many of Joel’s employees helped with the installation.

Green Building Supply fields 75-100 phone calls per day from homeowners, contractors, wholesalers, and even people with chemical sensitivities; so while six months of training may sound over-the-top, the level of consumer education incorporated into the Green Building Supply’s daily operations demonstrates the necessity of such an intensive process.

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### **Green is Not Black and White**

One of the things Joel tries to impart to his employees is the idea that not all greens are created equally. “Defining green is complicated because the parameters are multi-dimensional. It’s not black-and-white; it’s all about options. And that’s





a good thing, but it's also challenging for consumers to evaluate what is green versus what is just 'green washed.'"

"Unfortunately, consumers are often confused," Joel says, "and they have to rely on somebody else for accurate information. That's what we're here for." According to Joel, while there are organizations that certify

buildings and people, like the nationally recognized Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating, there is no accepted standard for building products. "While there are numerous green certification agencies, you have to do your homework because each institution uses a different criteria for their certification."

### **Raising the Bar**

"Some big companies advertise how 'green' they are, but they haven't changed their products much at all." Hirshberg believes that standards are being raised all the time, but he also feels that the green industry has lost some of its legitimacy because many larger companies have muscled their way into the green market. "The truth is, many green certification organizations are a pay-as-you-go program. You want a green label? You pay for it." This, according to Joel, is why some big box stores have come out with new lines of green products so quickly.

"They're the same products and, in most cases, they've just been re-labeled." Hirshberg says that some companies have modified their products by removing a few bad ingredients in order to comply with governmental standards, such as OSHA (Occupational Safety Hazards Administration) or CARB (California

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Resource Board). "Either that, or they have just added masking agents to cover up the odors," Joel adds. While Green Building Supply does sell some products that started out toxic but from which all of the harmful ingredients have since been removed, he says, "In my opinion, that's not as sustainable." There are an increasing number of companies, however, that do design products that are safe from inception, and who "walk their environmental talk." Those are the companies Hirshberg prefers to deal with.



## Shade of Green

If you had a tally sheet that would give you points for all the different characteristics that make a product green, and at the end you came up with the greatest number of points, you would have the greenest, or darkest green product. And at Green Building Supply, that tally sheet places emphasis not only on environmentally sustainable features, but also on the health and safety and performance of the product. According to Joel, a green product may still have toxic components with recycled content and a big carbon footprint. That kind of product, he says, would be 'light green.'

"People get carried away with energy efficiency as the primary component of green because it is so critical in today's world of peak oil. I support that," Joel says, "but I don't think that it's the number one issue. To me, health and safety are first." If you look at the Green Building Supply website, you'll find an abundance of information on the health and safety issues related to traditional building materials, as well as information on alternative products. "Without safety, without health, you could build the most energy and water efficient building in the universe. But if the people inside are ill, what good does it do?"

***"To me, health and safety are first."***

## A Midwest Thing

"Maybe it's a Midwest thing," Joel postulates, relating to his experiences at the dozens of trade shows he has attended, "but people like to see and touch things." Commenting on the perceived success of participating in trade shows, he continues, "Once consumers see and smell our products and have an opportunity to talk to our staff, they almost always buy. It might take them six months to a year," he says, "but they almost always choose a green product over a toxic alternative."

While there are companies in Iowa that sell certain green products like cork and bamboo, according to Joel, no one sells it all together in one place and has the knowledge and experience like Green Building Supply. The products listed on Green Building Supply's exhaustive online store— to which Joel credits the company's nation-wide client base—range from zero VOC paints, finishes, cleaners and adhesives to sustainable bamboo flooring, furniture, countertops and plywood; from wool and recycled carpeting and high performance, environmentally sound carpet padding to non-toxic natural linoleum countertops and wall paneling; and from solar hot water heating systems

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and water-saving toilets to recycled slate tile and cedar shake roofing. While Hirshberg modestly claims to “only offer products that improve indoor air quality” the range of products they deal with paired with their sales volume is anything but modest, especially in a city the size of Fairfield.

“There are only 10,000 people in this town. How much business can you do in a small town?” However, Hirshberg doesn't see the size of Fairfield or the area as a limitation for his company. In fact, Green Building Supply has become a green building leader and consultant not only in the community, but also in the state of Iowa, in the Midwest, and even in the nation. “We've supplied homes from ground up over the phone,” says Hirshberg, referring to clients in Washington, Oregon, California, and New York, to name a few.

According to Joel, Green Building Supply prices are approximately 15-20 percent less than in California. He says that's partly because Green Building Supply buys in such large volume and is therefore able to private label some of their products; this allows them to price products in a reasonable range.

### **Learning a Lesson the Hard Way**

Green Building Supply not only deals in sales nation-wide, but they also have suppliers all over the world. “If we can, we buy local,” Joel says, but laments that many of the local companies are slow to catch on, and still do not offer the products that meet Joel's green standards. For this reason, Green Building Supply sells many internationally manufactured products. Joel and Joy have visited many factories, but that has not always been an option; especially when it comes to products shipped from overseas.

Joel relates the story of when he first started to sell bamboo products about 12 years ago. Because bamboo products often contain toxic preservatives and are laminated with other harmful chemicals like formaldehyde, before Hirshberg began to sell bamboo his first question to manufacturers was, ‘Is it safe and nontoxic?’

***“If we can, we buy local.”***

Only after being assured that a product was safe would he begin to do business with a company. But a few years down the road, one of his chemically sensitive customers reported she was having sensitivity to the bamboo.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bamboo, primarily grown in southern China, is considered a sustainable material because it is self-regenerating and matures in three to seven years, a much quicker turnover than trees used for most traditional hardwood lumber. Carbon emissions and pollution from transportation involved in importing bamboo products from overseas is an environmental downside.



There were no third party certifications available at that time to prove whether the product was or was not toxic. “What was I supposed to do? Go to China?” said Hirshberg. Well he couldn’t go at the time, but the next time his distributor traveled to China, Joel asked him to stick his head in one of the glue drums at the bamboo treatment facility and report back what he smelled. Were the agents used to treat the bamboo natural and non-toxic like the company claimed? The distributor came back with ‘thumbs down,’ so Green Building Supply immediately stopped doing business with that company. After that, it took two years before Green Building Supply was able to find non-toxic, formaldehyde-free varieties of bamboo flooring. They now offer many other green flooring products that have solid third party documentation as well.

***“... money comes second to your kids’ and your health.”***

## **Obstacles**

Ascertaining what products are suitable for Green Building Supply is one thing, but convincing contractors to use green products, Joel says, is one of the greatest challenges. “I have to work with an average painter for a year with products before he’ll actually start using them.” He says he has to lower his prices substantially to be able to compete with what contractors normally use, or what they’re comfortable using.

“Learning new things turns out to be a bigger obstacle for many people than I realized. If you learn something new, you have to try it at your own expense.” The potential expense of learning, paired with the increased price of products is what keeps many contractors and consumers at bay. However, Joel feels that consumers, in general, are still pushing the envelope. “They’re all for it in most regards, except for price. If it’s too expensive, they won’t go for it.” But the main difference between most consumers and contractors is the bottom line.

Customers frequently ask Joel to talk to their contractors. He agrees to talk to them because, after years of experience, he says he knows what they’re looking for. “Performance is more important than health to many contractors,” according to Joel. That is, performance, in addition to price. However, for most people, when building a home for their family, Joel says the table is turned. Striking a chord on the issue of safety, he continues, “Money is important, but money comes second to your kids’ and your health.”



***“Look, we may not have everything out there and we may not always be the cheapest, but at least what we do sell, we know works and is safe.”***

### **Resources**

#### **Green Building Supply**

508 N. 2nd St., Fairfield, IA 52556  
(800) 405-0222  
(641) 469-5558  
[www.greenbuildingsupply.com//  
Public/Home/index.cfm](http://www.greenbuildingsupply.com/Public/Home/index.cfm)

#### **Bamboo Flooring**

[www.buildinggreen.com/  
auth/article.cfm/2008/9/16/  
Bamboo-Flooring/](http://www.buildinggreen.com/auth/article.cfm/2008/9/16/Bamboo-Flooring/)

#### **Fairfield Chamber of Commerce**

[www.fairfieldiowa.com/](http://www.fairfieldiowa.com/)

#### **Fairfield Go-Green 2020 Strategic Plan**

[www.fairfieldiowa.com/2020-fair-  
field-go-green-strategic-plan](http://www.fairfieldiowa.com/2020-fairfield-go-green-strategic-plan)

#### **Maharishi College of Management**

[www.mum.edu/](http://www.mum.edu/)

### **Working Together**

An *Alliant Energy* Energy Efficiency Partner, Green Building Supply educates people about rebates and home improvement programs available through Alliant Energy. However, Hirshberg would like to see support for, and promotion of, renewable energy improved. “For example, we sell solar hot water, but unfortunately, Alliant doesn’t yet provide credits for that. So far they don’t support renewables [in Iowa],” he says, adding that other states have been giving credit for wind and solar energy for years. “Surprisingly enough, we haven’t seen an upsurge in solar hot water here in Iowa. Even if we can save people 30-50%, they still don’t do it because the up-front charge is too high.”

Currently, Green Building Supply is a member of the Better Business Bureau of Iowa, the Center on Sustainable Communities in Des Moines, the Home Builders Association of Iowa, the Midwest Renewable Energy Association, the Iowa Renewable Energy Association and the Illinois Renewable Energy Association. They’re also approved by Green America (formerly Co-Op America), which means “Approved for People and Planet.”

### **Someone to Trust**

“We’re trying to hold up the flag and say, ‘Look, we may not have everything out there and we may not always be the cheapest, but at least what we do sell, we know works and is safe. That much we know, and we are pleased to share our information with anyone who calls.’” And there within lies the Hirshbergs’ motivation to stay in the business. “It’s a labor of love. It’s been that way since day one.”



*Green Entrepreneurs, Green Building Supply* is one of a series of case studies conducted with support from the Center for Food and Agricultural Research. Additional case studies are available on the Institute for Rural Affairs website at [www.IIRA.org](http://www.IIRA.org).



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