

Case study – Steber International



An Australian boatbuilding icon looks to its next generation of business

Colin Steber knew sustainability was getting into the bloodstream of his company when he overheard work colleagues at lunch comparing electricity bills to see who had saved the most money that quarter.

Steber International, an Australian-owned family boatbuilding business based in Taree, had been working hard to embed environmental sustainability into all aspects of its planning and operations. Clearly, the strategy was working.

As Business Development Manager of Steber International and the company sustainability champion, Colin Steber already knew the company was making substantial savings. But the lunch room conversation revealed something else. It convinced Steber that the tangible gains were a symptom of the attitudes and behaviours that had taken hold among the company's varied workforce.

'Saving money is great, but it's not the big return for us,' says Steber. 'Our big achievement has been integrating our quality, OH&S and environmental management systems.

'Our people deal with chemicals so priority one was to make sure we were doing the right thing with OH&S and disposal, and complying with all the legislation. Priority two was to find ways to minimise waste, save power and save money. ►

In brief

Steber International, a leader in boat building and industrial composite technology, manufactures high quality boats for fishing, charter, patrol, sea rescue, medical support, surveillance and general boating use.

By taking a more sustainable approach to business, Steber has reduced its use of solvents, minimised waste, cut energy use, and is now sourcing timber from sustainable balsa wood plantations.

Steber has also:

- modified a factory wall to allow natural sunlight and reduced compressed air leaks, saving over \$5000 a year
- installed a solvent recycling system which recycles all acetone so Steber now recovers 70 per cent
- installed recycle bins for brass, aluminium, copper and steel throughout the factory to recycle material and reduce landfill waste by 15 per cent in the first year
- shut down a rarely-used hot water system potentially saving 900 kilowatt hours of electricity per year.



- We've addressed the big ticket items, and now we're looking for further improvements.'

Steber International itself has stood the test of time. The multi award-winning business was founded in 1946 producing timber hull boats. Today, Steber International employs 50 staff and is regarded as the premium manufacturer of commercial fibreglass vessels and associated composite components. Clients include the Australian Federal Police, Australian Customs, NSW Water Police, NSW Fisheries, NSW Maritime, and Marine Rescue NSW.

The Steber International manufacturing plant is on a four-acre site with two acres under cover. The plant has designated areas of composite manufacture, construction, fitout, engineering, sheet metal and internal cabinetry, furniture and upholstery.

The company joined the Sustainability Advantage Program in March 2009 to continually reduce waste, minimise power consumption and get employees more involved in a sustainable approach to business.

Steber International insulated its fibre-glassing area to reduce demand on air conditioning; installed a solvent chemical still to recycle acetone; reduced 11 printer/copiers to two document centres; introduced paper recycling bins and recycling locations for off-cut raw materials; switched to using balsa wood harvested from sustainable plantations (rather than old-growth forests); saved energy by fixing leaks in its air compressor; and established an on-site environment, health and safety committee, and a separate sustainability committee.

The solvent chemical still, which recycles acetone used in making fibreglass, is a standout.

'We use the acetone again and again and again and it is as good as new each time,' says Steber. 'We recycle it until it evaporates. We were buying about 7000 kilograms of acetone a year. Now we buy about 2000 kilograms. It is a huge saving.'

Electricity is another big expense for Steber International. The firm installed see-through wall panels in its main construction shed to allow natural light and does not have to use power-hungry 400 watt high bay down-lights in this area for six months of the year, saving Steber about 728 kilowatts of electricity.

About 40 per cent of the company's electricity usage goes to run an air compressor. Steber says he knows this is inefficient, and is fixing compress air leaks that will save \$5000 a year.

'Sustainability is always developing,' says Steber. 'You are never finished and there is always more you can do. We are only at the tip of what we want to achieve.'

'I was sceptical at first. I thought this program was just another government thing to run along with. But as the months went by and we became more involved, I was more passionate about the whole subject of sustainability. Now it's part of our business.'

Your next step

To find out how your business can join the Sustainability Advantage Program, contact the team:

Email sustainbus@environment.nsw.gov.au

Call 02 8837 6000

Visit environment.nsw.gov.au/sustainbus/sustainabilityadvantage.htm