

Small Business

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OF BUSINESS TIMES | SEPTEMBER 30 - OCTOBER 6, 2011



From fair trade nonprofit to green products for profit: CEO Aseem Das has moved World Centric into green foodware — and doubled revenue since 2008

From the San Francisco Business Times:

<http://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/print-edition/2011/09/30/green-food-packaging-biz-stacks-up.html>

Green food packaging biz stacks up

Startup grabs piece of \$300 million market

Premium content from San Francisco Business Times by Krystal Peak

Date: Friday, September 30, 2011, 3:00am PDT

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Big ideas come in compostable packages for Palo Alto manufacturer World Centric, which continues to grow quickly from its fair trade philanthropic beginnings. With the use of greener products on the rise, World Centric is projected to break \$11 million in revenue this year — more than doubling their revenue since 2008.

The 7-year-old company provides compostable food service disposables and food packaging products for use in schools, corporate cafeterias, restaurants, hospitals and major product distributors. The products are made from renewable resources like corn, sugarcane and wheat straw fiber, many of which are by-products of the agriculture industry.

The bioplastics industry, which is only half of the compostable products that World Centric offers, is estimated to be a \$300-million-per-year industry within the U.S. — and growing. World Centric has made a name for itself as one of the few certified compostable wares companies in a space with Colorado-based Eco Products.

World Centric customer Café Gratitude, a San Francisco raw and vegan restaurant, stakes its business on offering green choices. **Vinicio Penate**, the restaurant's product purchasing manager, makes sure that Café Gratitude's vendors align closely with its ethics.

"For a while there weren't any companies supplying PLA (a thermoplastic polyester derived from renewable resources, such as corn starch) except for World Centric," said Penate. "And even as some companies started bringing in PLA we stayed with World Centric because they feel the same way we do about not supporting genetically modified vegetables."

Fair trade beginnings

World Centric CEO and founder **Aseem Das** came from the applied research field of computer science and was searching for a way to combine his skills with his passion for environmental education. In 2004, he set out to create a nonprofit organization offering information on how to live a greener life.

"We created this website with all this informative content," said Das, who had to look for a way to support the site without soliciting for donations. "We landed on selling different fair trade items that were in line with our ethics."

After several years of selling chocolates, honey, cashews, tea and other items to support the upkeep of the website, Das noticed that the sale of fair trade items was taking over the organization and was impeding his ability to gain 501(c)3 status.

Das said it was a struggle to keep up with the educational side of the website while running a nearly one-man shop for the first three years. He soon noticed that the demand for the compostable utensils and plates they were shipping in from Asia were on the rise. "Since companies were buying in bulk, it was manageable and profitable to work with that focus in mind."

Greener profits

In 2009, World Centric transitioned into a traditional for-profit, compostable food-ware company that still dedicated a fair share of its resources and funding toward green projects.

World Centric has achieved a carbon-neutral supply chain and gives at least 25 percent of pre-tax profits to grassroots groups annually, heavily discounts products for schools and nonprofits and powers its offices with wind and solar energy. In 2009, the company planted 275,000 new trees to offset its carbon emissions and is deciding on a 2010 project.

The company is working on developing products from post-consumer agriculture waste in California — to gain more opportunities in state and in the country.

"If we can create products locally for consumers," said Das, "then we can not only make them cheaper and with a smaller footprint, but also prove that outsourcing isn't necessary for this type of production."

Snapshot:

World Centric

What it does: Manufacture and distribute certified compostable food-ware items.

HQ: Palo Alto.

CEO: Aseem Das.

Employees: 17+

Founded: 2004.

Funding: Bootstrapped.

2011 projected revenues: \$11 million.

2010 revenue: \$9.4 million.

2009 revenue: \$7.6 million.

2008 revenue: \$5.4million.

Website:

worldcentric.org



From fair trade nonprofit to green products for profit: CEO Aseem Das has moved World Centric into green foodware — and doubled revenue since 2008 in the process.

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BY KRystal PEAK

San Francisco Business Times

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SUSTAINABLE & COMPOSTABLE

SNAPSHOT:

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