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Trucking Firms Test Market For Energy-Saving Technology

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Special to Transport Topics

The widespread push for environmental upgrades in commercial enterprises has spread to the transportation industry, with many trucking-related companies conducting an overhaul of the way they do business — from powering their warehouses with solar energy to using recycled paper.

Some of these firms have answered the call to go green with self-financed ventures that operate independently and provide the parent company with environmental upgrades without the expense of hiring another firm. Although both ecological and financial benefits stem from environmental upgrades, however, many businesses still fear the dollar sign attached to such changes.

"If you use the word 'green,' people will turn away," said Hiroko Kawai, a principal director of transportation efficiency for the Rocky Mountain Institute, Snowmass, Colo. "The word 'green' doesn't necessarily carry a dollar sign; they have to see in their own language that next month's payment will be easier."

Kawai said many small businesses are skeptical of testing new green technologies because it can prove to be a financial drain without any promise of heightened efficiency or cost-saving upgrades.

"One of the greatest barriers to [upgrades] is an emotional barrier," she said. "They are very skeptical because they don't have the funds to test technologies by themselves, and they don't have any room to experiment with wishy-washy technology."

One of the solutions to this problem, Kawai said, is to look to larger businesses that are in what she called a "leadership role" regarding energy efficiency. Two such companies — Arpin Group, Inc. and NFI Industries — are showing the industry how it can be done.

Arpin Group, West Warwick, R.I., a holding company for several firms that specialize in moving household goods, has added a division specifically designed to "explore and produce green alternatives that can be applied to the moving industry."

"We realized we couldn't be the same company 100 years from now," said Peter Arpin, partner of the Arpin Group. "We looked at everything — the materials we touched, the materials we used — and little by little, we've been doing things to become a better environmental steward."

Arpin Renewable Energy, a self-described "research and development company," has taken on 12 "Green Initiatives" to reduce the firm's overall carbon footprint. Created in 2008 after advice from an environmental consultant, Arpin Renewable Energy has focused on goals and solutions for its parent company, but it hopes to share what it has learned through evaluating and making suggestions to other firms hoping to reduce their own climatic effects.

Among the company's initiatives is a "Green Loan" program that allows its employees to borrow money at low interest rates to invest in hybrid automobiles or other "energy-saving home improvements."

Arpin Renewable Energy also has retrofitted its Rhode Island headquarters with new lighting and sensors to save energy



Arpin Group partner Peter Arpin, right, and consultant Norman Cook hold a solar panel developed for trailers.

and reduce the emission of greenhouse gases. The company estimates that it will reduce its carbon emissions by 136 metric tons each year as a result.

Even tractor-trailer designs may change. Arpin Group currently is working to retrofit its fleet with solar collection material that will eliminate vehicle idling and charge each unit's battery. The tests are still about six months from finishing, but Peter Arpin said the results have been positive and hopes to eventually outfit the company's entire fleet with the material.

"The results have been fantastic," Arpin said of the research. "We know we're putting the



Arpin Group

A worker installs a solar panel on the roof of an Arpin Van Lines' trailer.

they just can't throw anything into the garbage."

Arpin Group has joined the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's SmartWay Transport partnership, which helps to identify and brand products and services that have a clean, fuel-efficient approach to freight transportation.

NFI, a company specializing in warehousing and distribution, announced in April the opening of NFI Solar — a division that will "finance, own and manage solar-energy systems on commercial properties," according to its press release.

NFI Solar was created with "the intent of generating clean sustainable power." Though a new division, it already has installed more than 6,000 solar panels on its corporate headquarters in Cherry Hill, N.J. The company plans to add the same kind of renovations to three more of its New Jersey facilities by the end of the year. In addition, NFI Solar said it plans to expand its efforts across the country to its locations in states such as California and Texas.

With the focus on transportation-produced emissions on the rise, firms such as NFI and Arpin Group are stepping up to reduce their effects on the climate — and it is not just the environment that wins: Both firms say they are saving money and creating jobs.

Through retrofitting its corporate headquarters, Arpin Group estimates the firm will save about \$31,400 dollars in energy costs annually. Similarly, NFI Solar expects to save up to 25% of the energy costs for its facilities each year as a result of solar panel installation.

Green jobs are being created as well, a definite virtue in light of the nation's high unemployment rate, which was 9.7% in May.

"This initial solar power project will create a significant number of jobs in the sustainability industry," NFI Chief Executive Officer Sidney Brown said at the opening of NFI Solar. "As this division of NFI grows, so will the opportunities for more jobs in the construction and maintenance of solar energy systems across the country."

Although neither company has begun offering their new products to other businesses, both said that, eventually, they will.

right materials on these trucks; we've made them more efficient and far past compliant on federal legislation."

The little things count, too. Each location recycles aluminum cans and glass and uses solely recycled paper for printing. The company added that by investing in information technology upgrades, it has greatly diminished its need for both internal and external printing and has a goal eventually to become a paperless company.

Arpin said barriers such as cost and difficulties in convincing companies to run more environmentally-friendly operations are easily outweighed by the benefits of green upgrades.

"You can do this and make the right investment and get a great return," he said. "We try to get the employees to the point where

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