

New Business Opportunities for Unwanted Materials

By: Shannon Lavin

MnTAP Communication Staff

In Crosby, Minnesota, Graphic Packaging International (GPI) was looking to throw away office supplies and other materials after its recent name change from Riverwood International to GPI. Among the items was a 4,000 pound trade show booth. “I didn’t want the display booth going to the landfill, but I didn’t know what to do with it,” said Nancy Osvold, GPI environmental coordinator. “The Materials Exchange was my connection.”

The Minnesota Materials Exchange, located at the University of Minnesota, is a free service provided by the Minnesota Technical Assistance Program (MnTAP) which links organizations that have reusable goods they no longer need to those who can use them. By offering a business reuse network, Materials Exchange helps prevent usable materials from becoming waste. The program doesn’t store materials at its site; it links companies looking for materials and those who have materials available.

After a phone call from GPI reporting the available trade show booth, Brita Sailer, Materials Exchange Coordinator in Park Rapids was quick to contact the Minnesota State Community and Technical College, Wadena Campus. She knew Carpentry Instructor Dave Kraemer was looking for materials to use in his shop. In just a short time the exchange was underway and the booth was being transported to the college.

“The trade show booth was used in many ways,” Kraemer said. “Some of the material was used to fix a wall inside a campus building; other materials were used during the construction of fish houses built by students. The Wadena Campus also received 13 wooden crates that stored the display during transportation. “Many of these crates were used in our shop. A farmer came and picked up the rest of the crates to fix up the pig lot on his farm,” said Kraemer. “I kept one [crate] around for remembrance of the event.” He plans to transform this last remaining crate into a phone booth to be used at the school.

Dave Kraemer remembers the exchange as a fun event. Semi-trucks transporting the material not only attracted a great deal of attention from students and faculty members, but the exchange itself helped benefit many people.

The successful exchange between GPI and the Wadena Campus diverted over 4,000 pounds from Minnesota’s landfills in 2004. In addition, GPI saved an estimated \$400 in disposable costs and the Wadena Campus saved an estimated \$25,000 in purchase costs.

Other materials often posted on the program’s Web site include: plastic drums, cardboard boxes, packing peanuts and bubble wrap, to name a few. On occasion, rare and unusual materials may be reused

through the Materials Exchange. A barn, 30-foot bridge, 32,000 pounds of jelly and a chicken plucker all have been exchanged between businesses.

“These items are not exchanged very often,” says Suzy Mellem, Materials Exchange coordinator. “However, if companies have reusable items in good condition, we’ll help connect them to someone who can use them.”

Top 10 Most Frequent Materials Exchanged

1. Wood pallets
2. Plastic drums
3. Office furniture
4. Packing peanuts
5. Plastic buckets
6. 3-ring binders
7. Cardboard boxes
8. Office supplies
9. Bubble wrap
10. Photocopiers/printers

Top 10 Most Unusual Materials Exchanged

1. 30-foot bridge
2. 12 tons of wrapping paper
3. Chicken plucker
4. 32,000 lb of jelly
5. Barn
6. Sidewalk sign
7. Concrete curb parking lot stoppers
8. Cash register
9. Satellite dish
10. Video wall

Successful exchanges happen every day around Minnesota. In the last five years, the Materials Exchange program has helped businesses save about \$3 million and exchanged over eight million pounds of reusable materials.

“It’s a win-win situation for everyone,” says Mellem. “Both companies save money and valuable resources are kept out of the landfill.”

The best way to find out what materials are currently available is to search the Materials Exchange Web page at <mnexchange.org>. Online, companies can also sign up for a twice monthly e-mail that describes the latest available and wanted listings. For more information call Suzy Mellem at 612/624-5119 or 800/247-0015.

Minnesota is served by nine programs that make up the Minnesota Materials Exchange Alliance. These alliance sites are located throughout the state and provide local service to designated areas. Contact Suzy Mellem for assistance in your area.

The Minnesota Technical Assistance Program (MnTAP) is an outreach program at the University of Minnesota that helps Minnesota businesses develop and implement industry-tailored solutions that maximize resource efficiency, prevent pollution and reduce costs and energy use. Established in 1984, MnTAP is funded by a grant from the Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance to the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, Division of Environmental Health Sciences.

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