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by Kris Ferrazza, Correspondent

VASSALBORO -- Conservation, composting, community and cows all figure into the business model that is Duratherm Window Corporation.

At first glance it might seem an unlikely formula for success, but by focusing on making connections with employees and promoting sustainability, the company has built a competitive edge.

Forward-thinking and efficient, Duratherm's management team accepted a Governor's Award for business Excellence earlier this year. The award recognized the custom hardwood window and door manufacturer as a business leader in Maine, highlighting its excellence in craftsmanship as well as community service.



But what about those cows?

The Scottish Highland cattle that roam the 20 acres surrounding the Vassalboro manufacturing plant are a clear sign that something is a little bit different at Duratherm. They are a living breathing symbol of what Duratherm President Tim Downing said the company represents: prudent stewardship of resources, sustainability and good health.

"We've been very blessed," Downing said.

A year ago the company joined Maine Businesses for Sustainability, and employees filled out an assessment form to see how the Vassalboro

business was doing. Downing said he was told the results likely would give the company a blueprint or a road map for the future. But, after Duratherm's assessment answers were reviewed and verified, the company achieved "champion status," in its first year.

"It's been victory in a lot of cases," he said. "We have been on the right track with things we were doing intuitively."



Duratherm windows and doors are known for their energy efficiency, sustainability and durability, and Downing said he wanted the company to mirror its product.

Toward that end, his vision has been to make the business a model for energy efficiency. The work environment is full of opportunities to make that happen, he said, so employees recycle office paper, compost, conserve energy and even use the plant's sawdust waste to make Durabriques that can be burned in woodstoves.

"It has allowed me to get out in the community," Downing said, explaining he has delivered Durabriques to senior citizens in the area. "It's a very convenient and clean product, and it's also improving our bottom line."

Durabriques take 400 tons of sawdust and scrap wood out of the waste stream at Duratherm each year, the president said, calling it "a win-win situation."

"You have to do it because you feel like you're contributing. You have to get that sense of satisfaction," Downing said. "I drive people nuts around here. I go around after people and turn off lights and check their trash cans."

When he finds trash that should have been recycled or composted, he reminds employees and encourages them to buy into the system.

"It's persistence and it's relationship building," he said. "But they are able to make the connection. They want to do a good job."

The company also has a reputation for giving back to the community, in the past with monetary donations, and in the current economy, with time and labor. Employees are encouraged to speak up if there is a need in their community, whether it is at church, school or even at home.

"We are almost obligated to do what we can to meet those needs in the community," he said.

Downing said managers are happy to give staff flexible hours to allow them to coach or attend their

children's games or to take part in other outside activities. Duratherm and its employees also have donated materials and labor to replace church windows and doors, build ball fields and dugouts, and perform other work-related tasks.

"You can be creative in your community and use the gifts and talents you and your staff have," he said. "You are able to make contributions and it's also a prudent use of your resources because for not a lot of dollars, you have created value."

While employees are giving back to the environment and the community, the company is looking after them.

Downing said the management team has on average more than 20 years of service with the company and shop employees average 13 years with Duratherm. Sustaining approximately 70 employees is another piece of the puzzle, the president said.

In addition to paying a fair wage, he said employees have full benefits, 401K retirement accounts, a wellness program and an employee assistance program designed to offer counseling or other help to anyone dealing with certain issues.

"You take it one person at a time, and that's the way society is going to get better," Downing said.

The herd of shaggy critters outside the back door is another way the company has enhanced the work environment. they not only add pastoral beauty to the surroundings, but the bulls will be processed into grass-fed beef that will be distributed to the staff.

"They are friendly. People like to come by and watch them and brush them," he said of the cattle. The sustainable herd also will promote healthy eating.

Downing said he is happy to give back to the communities and families that have been so good to Duratherm.

"The group we have and their commitment to the organization has been tremendous," he said. Downing said he has instilled his own values and pursued a dream of what he thought the company could be, and he is delighted with the outcome. The business was founded in 1967 by Phil Cole, and still enjoys the support of the Cole family,



especially Elizabeth Cole, who Downing referred to as "a rock of salient stability."

The corporate structure at Duratherm is also designed with an eye on sustainability. Downing said, noting a recent training initiative has turned the old way of thinking about management on its head. The president said he no longer views himself to be at the top.

"What we have done is we have flipped the pyramid and we are all looking up at the community we are serving and we are all looking up at the customer," Downing said. "It's been a real culture change."

Duratherm's plan for the future is to continue to develop and service the high-end architectural community. Downing said people always seem amazed to learn that a manufacturer in Vassalboro is providing windows and doors for residential, commercial and institutional customers nationwide, at locations -- including the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California and the Monticello visitor's Center in Virginia.

But Duratherm has no plans to rest on its laurels. With a goal of being fossil fuel free in 2015, Downing is enthusiastic about a 36-foot solar wall, new this year, which will preheat air before it comes into the building. It is expected to result in 65 percent less propane use.

"That's pretty exciting for us," he said.

Initiatives like these are an ongoing process of investigating new ways of doing things while maintaining an interest in, and a dedication to, a cause.

"There's no question you have to be committed to it. It's not going to happen by itself," Downing said. "But it's only going to help us continue to be competitive down the road. The price of energy isn't going to be going down."

*For more about Duratherm, visit the Web site at [www.durathermwindow.com](http://www.durathermwindow.com).*