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Pace working to prove 'green' is good for business

The Business Journal of Milwaukee - by [Stacy Vogel Davis](#)

Andrew Pace isn't interested in the touchy-feely aspects of the green lifestyle.

He's not here to tell you he can make your house "carbon-neutral" or redecorate your kitchen using "all-natural" products.

"I think people should look at the pros and cons of everything they do," he said. "There is no completely green product, and there are no completely green projects."

Instead, Pace is focused on the practical side of environmentally friendly building. Through his town of Waukesha businesses, **Green Design Center** and **Safe Building Solutions**, he helps customers achieve goals such as making their homes healthier or doing the least amount of damage possible to the environment.

The two don't always go hand-in-hand, one of many misconceptions Pace is working to correct.

His work has led him to create the "Degree of Green" program that he presents in publications and conferences around the country. Pace is now ready to take his business national and is in talks with companies interested in starting Green Design Centers in several states.

"Instead of just being a vendor in the green industry, Andy has really gone out and become an ambassador for sustainability," said Sue Loomans, executive director of the **Wisconsin Green Building Alliance**, where Pace formerly served as board member.

The average newly constructed home contains 12,000 to 20,000 chemicals, Pace said. The products he sells can control 90 percent of those chemicals, preventing the gases from being released inside the home, he said.

A chance incident got the 39-year-old Pace interested in green design 18 years ago. He was working for his family's company, **Mitchell, Pace & Associates**, with a team putting concrete coating on an underground parking lot for a Milwaukee condominium project. The coating was water-based, but several residents complained about the smell and three workers ended up in the hospital because of the fumes.

"We quickly learned that water-based does not mean safe," Pace said. "It didn't address the toxicity of the product."

Pace found a brand of paint, Safecoat from **American Formulating & Manufacturing**, that releases fewer toxins in the air. He soon realized there was a market for healthy interior building products, and he launched Safe Building Solutions in 1993.

"In 1993, green wasn't more than a color," he said. "We would call it common-sense, healthy building materials."

He didn't find much interest among commercial contractors, but individuals, especially people with chemical sensitivity, understood the value of the products early on. He opened a retail side that eventually became Green Design Center.



Scott Paulus

Andrew Pace ... "In 1993, green wasn't more than a color. We would call it common-sense, healthy building materials."

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The business was ahead of its time, said Lyn Falk, owner of **Retailworks Inc.** in Thiensville. Falk was an early believer in Pace's products and offers them to her interior design customers.

"There were a lot of times where we both thought, 'Boy are we kind of crazy doing this? Because no one understands it,'" she said. "But we both have hung in there, and it's paid off."

Today, contractors have caught up with environmentally conscious consumers, and the wholesale side makes up 70 percent of Pace's business, he said.

By 2006, Pace's companies were bringing in \$2 million to \$4 million annually and growing by 25 to 30 percent a year, he said. Revenue dropped 40 percent in 2008 and 2009 as the construction industry dried up, but his businesses have remained profitable, he said.

In 2009, Pace opened the first off-site Green Design Center inside **The Color Gallery**, Antigo. Pace acts as a consultant to The Color Gallery, trains its staff and provides the business with materials and marketing.

He hopes to take the Green Design Center concept nationwide and is in talks with stores in Ohio, Texas and California that are interested in opening centers.

Along the way, Pace has worked to educate his colleagues and the general public about healthy, environmentally friendly building products. He's frustrated that companies use the word "green" without specifying what it means.

"You need to think about, 'What do they mean by green?'" he said. "How is it affecting me and the environment positively?"

He created the Degree of Green program to help eliminate the confusion. The program divides green principles into three categories: human health, environmental health and sustainability. It then ranks products in each of those categories.

Different consumers have different needs within the program, he said. For example, someone with indoor air allergies wouldn't use the same products as someone whose top priority is energy efficiency.

For Amy Snyder, owner of **PT Plus** in Greenfield, the priority was providing a healthier space for her patients when she remodeled an old home into a physical therapy clinic.

"It's important to provide a healthy environment for our patients to heal in," she said.

Green Design Center provided materials for everything from lighting to flooring, she said. The products made a noticeable difference.

"We didn't have any of that leftover paint smell," she said. "Everything smelled fresh and clean when we moved in."

Pace's efforts have encouraged George Kanavas, owner of **Kanavas Landscape Management** in Elm Grove, to use fewer chemicals in his own business. Kanavas worked with Green Design Center in decorating his home and business, and the process inspired him to be more green in all aspects of his life, he said.

"It's just a better way to live," he said.

ANDREW PACE

**Owner, Green Design Center
and Safe Building Solutions**

Age: 39

Home: Brookfield

Family: Wife, Valerie, is an accountant.

Education: Graduated from Brookfield East High School in 1988 and took some courses at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Pace quit college because he wanted to be an entrepreneur and

felt real-world experience could teach him more than he learned from his professors, he said.

Hobbies: Racquetball, travel, spending time with family and friends

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