



Chris Clemmer and the "Think Chair": A product "can be taken out of the earth, used for its life cycle, and put back into the earth."

David Perry

## At Barrows, an effortless green >

### Executive Summary:

*The business furniture sold at this local company is naturally friendly to the environment because it is nearly indestructible.*

### By David Perry

Recycling is part and parcel of being successful in increasingly green-conscious business these days. Chris Clemmer of Roanoke-based Barrows Business Environments has other ideas. Barrows, a Steelcase office furniture dealer, sells furniture that may never need to be recycled.

"I was in an office recently that had Steelcase file cabinets from 1949, and they're still using them," he says. "The City of Danville had desks in its purchasing

department from 1979."

Clemmer, marketing and sales manager and part owner of the northwest Roanoke furniture dealer, says, "If it lasts forever and it's good design, then it doesn't need to be replaced. That's as green as it gets."

Steelcase doesn't just make tank-tough desks and file cabinets; it manufactured the first product in the world ever to be "Cradle to Cradle" certified. That includes the "Think" office chair, on display in Barrows' offices. Cradle to Cradle certification is the brainchild of William McDonough, a Charlottesville environmental guru who gives his seal of approval to products that are manufactured with eco-sustainability in mind. *Cradle to Cradle* is the title of his popular book, the one that started the movement.

A Cradle to Cradle-certified product "can be taken out of the earth, used for its life cycle, and put back into the earth," says Clemmer. He speaks highly of Steelcase's environmental commitment.

The company "bought a wind farm that produces 17 percent of its global power. It

built the first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)-certified manufacturing plant," he says. "It's a wood manufacturing plant, and treating wood is anything but green."


But Clemmer says being green is no big deal to Steelcase.

"It's green and people don't even know they're buying it," says Clemmer of the typical Steelcase item. Unlike most environmentally-friendly goods, "it doesn't cost more; it's just built into the product." Local customers include Breakell Inc. and Lanford Brothers Co.

Barrows Business Environments cleans and

repairs office furniture to keep it in top shape. But, says Clemmer, "That gets to be cost prohibitive. When you can buy a new one for \$200 and it costs you \$150 to paint it, you may as well buy a new one and recycle the old one."

Like the products he sells, Clemmer's path to the green office furniture business is unusual. He took classes for a while at Virginia Western Community College before moving into retail.

Clemmer, ever the optimist, moved from a sunglasses sales job in a mall to a job in Barrows' sales department in 2004 and in April of last year, became an owner in the business taking over marketing and sales in January. 

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