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## Keeping the world clean (One Store at a Time) This San Francisco entrepreneur put her mind to eco-friendly work. -*Francesca Di Meglio*



Taja di Leonardi, the founder and managing partner of Ecohome Improvement in the San Francisco Bay Area, wants all American homes to be “green”—and she started with her own. When she was ready to renovate her house, di Leonardi looked for products that were ecologically sound, from sustainable forests and free of unnecessary and harmful chemicals. She eventually found some green products at various conferences and events for the environmentally-minded. However, it wasn’t convenient or easy for her as a consumer.

### **The industry is growing about 30 percent annually**

Next, di Leonardi went to Presidio School of Management, an MBA program in Sustainable Management that integrates social and environmental values into the coursework. There, the professors asked her to consider what she wanted to do with her life. “I looked at what was



important to me, and that was to be a part of a business that created change,” says di Leonardi. For her final project, she created a business plan for a hypothetical store which would put all the green building products—from paint that is green-seal approved and free of Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC) to countertops made entirely of recycled glass—under one roof. Three

months after graduation in November 2005, di Leonardi opened the doors of Ecohome Improvement.

The green home building movement in the United States is growing by leaps and bounds. Experts, including author and activist Jerry Yudelson, estimate that the industry is growing about 30 percent annually. In fact, in the last year, di Leonardi says the number of green home improvement stores in the country has risen from 27 to 50.

Awareness about environmental issues is surging across the country, thanks in part to films like Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and politicians putting environmental concerns in the headlines. As a result, green companies like Whole Foods Market have started to gain traction in the mainstream.

In its first year, Ecohome Improvement showed profits, and with six employees, products from about 40 vendors and a line of cabinetry that recently launched nationally, it is showing great promise. One of di Leonardi’s biggest successes so far is that she has been able to organize and

establish a supply chain of new vendors, manufacturers and installers to make green home improvement more convenient and reliable for consumers. She also promotes women-run and local businesses through her company's work.

Showing heart with employees is part of di Leonardi's commitment to creating a humane organization on every level. Everyone who works at Ecohome Improvement, regardless of how few hours he or she puts in, gets health insurance, a free gym membership and an education stipend.

Ecohome Improvement wants this approach to business to translate with consumers. "The customer sees people who are working from a place of passion and purpose, and he or she gets a very different experience than when going into other stores," says di Leonardi. "The look and feel of the store is a place where you get inspired to sit down and create home, look at inspirational books, and talk to people who offer meaningful advice and listen to what's important to you."

While di Leonardi sees little competition in the San Francisco Bay Area for now, it may be only a matter of time before more stores try to address the same market. She aims to beat the competition from the get-go by continuing to simplify the supply chain, offer fair prices on well-made, environmentally-friendly products, and develop the brand nationally.

One challenge standing in her way are the prices of green products, which still tend to be 10 to 20 percent higher than standard home improvement goods. Paints range from \$27.99 to \$39.99, and flooring ranges from \$4.99 per square foot for bamboo to \$10.99 per square foot for antique oak that is reclaimed from 150-year-old barns. These prices are competitive, says di Leonardi, who also adds that when compared to other premium products, green goods cost about the same.



Di Leonardi says the top reasons for creating an environmentally-friendly home include the power it gives you to purchase with your values and the fact that these products are better for your health. For example, the cabinetry the company recently unveiled is Forest Stewardship Council-certified, which means there was no clear cutting or harm brought to animals or indigenous people when gathering the materials. In addition, the product is put together with soy-based glue that is free of urea formaldehyde, a known carcinogen.

Yet another compelling reason people might start paying attention to these green products is because they have become as stylish as they are sensible. And homeowners, especially in a down market, are always trying to stand out from the crowd. "In the end, green building products are a better investment because they are more lovely to live with," says di Leonardi. "They create a home that you feel good in. They create a home that has a story to tell."

John Gatewood of Oakland, CA, recently remodeled his kitchen and put a deck in his backyard—all with products from Ecohome Improvement. He says he was looking for high quality and environmentally-friendly materials, which is what drew him into the store when he saw the sign from the street. He also refurbished existing items to avoid creating waste. Now, he encourages others to think green. "I like that I walk into my kitchen knowing it was done in the most sustainable way possible," says Gatewood. "I didn't generate a dumpster full of trash." If di Leonardi has her way, many more people will have a chance to apply their own environmental convictions when deciding how to tackle home improvement projects.

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