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PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Green companies are on a natural high

Marcus Gibson reports on the growing demand for environmentally friendly products and the enterprises benefiting from the boom

One of the most visible trends in marketing and retailing in recent years has been the emergence of companies offering "natural" products and services. In the UK, such companies are also among the fastest growing.

Tristel, a privately owned company based near Newmarket, was founded in 1998 to exploit research advances made by Bruce Green, a British chemist. Today more than 100 UK hospitals are using Tristel's biocidal wipes to clean surgical instruments and surfaces in an effort to rid hospitals of the scourge of MRSA, the resistant form of the staphylococcus bacteria.

Mr Green pioneered the use of chlorine dioxide, the chemical in the wipes that acts as a biocide but is otherwise benign. Earlier, he formulated the first treatment for head lice that contained no organophosphate – the potentially harmful chemical that was also a key constituent of gas shells in world war one.

According to Paul Swinney, Tristel's business development manager, there is a large and untapped market for its wipes.

Other companies are thriving in the natural products sector, a loosely defined market that covers everything from green chemistry, consumer medical devices and product disposal to cosmetics and nutraceuticals – products that have both pharmaceutical and nutritious properties. In the food and drink sector, companies producing fruit and cereal "boost" bars, fruit juice mixes or "smoothies" are among the fastest growing in their market.

Eliminating toxicity has been the goal of Scionix, a company spun out from Leicester University, which has researched and developed a series of chemicals based on ionic liquids – solvents that can replace potentially far more harmful ones used in cleaning products – for uses in chromium-plating and metal-polishing.

Dr Andrew Abbott, Scionix's founder, has teamed up with Whyte Chemicals, a UK-based company, to market a range of biodegradable solutions that can dissolve metal oxides – eliminating the need for strong acids or alkalis in the metal-plating process.

In some instances, the natural product and environmental sectors overlap. Environmental Business Products, a re-manufacturer of inkjet cartridges based in west London, passed a milestone in the UK environment sector last April when it achieved a turnover of £25m.

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Started in a garage by its three founders, it was a recycling business before its time. EBP created innovative technology for re-using and recycling inkjet cartridges. The company now has operations in Germany, France, Holland and Spain, and employs more than 200 people.

Pat Stead, managing director, says: "Over the years EBP has played a very significant part in both the legitimisation and growth of our industry." About 3.5m inkjet cartridges this year have been diverted from landfill sites and recycled by EBP, saving transport costs and the broader environmental costs of landfill disposal. "Each new laser cartridge can require up to six pints of oil to make," he adds.

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Steep rises in the price of oil, for instance, have driven demand among small businesses for "quick-fix" ways of reducing energy bills. Fluoresave, a maker of lighting control units, is one company that has benefited. Michael Dolphin, managing director, says the company's electronic unit can cut office and warehouse lighting energy costs by more than 30 per cent.

Based on technology that was originally developed in Australia, Fluoresave's units allow fluorescent and other lights to run at lower voltages. The units continuously monitor the variation in the output of the current and mains voltage. When additional lights in the circuit are switched on, Fluoresave reverts back to mains voltage to ignite the lights, then waits for the current to stabilise before returning to energy-saving mode.

An electrical contractor need visit only once to connect the Fluoresave unit to a slot between the mains and the lighting, says Mr Dolphin. "What could be more natural than that?" he asks.

Hospitals are using biocidal wipes to clean instruments Charlie Bibby