

People, planet, profit: Startup consultancy helps companies watch all three

BY KIRBY LEE DAVIS
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TULSA – Deanne Dutton Hughes sees a wide-open field before her new Tulsa company, Third Branch Engineering.

Where many environmental consultants help Oklahoma companies monitor and meet governmental requirements, her one-person firm looks beyond the rules. Third Branch teaches Fortune 1,000 companies to embrace environmental strategies not just for bottom-line profitability, but also their long-term missions and vision.

“We’re going to grow this as the market grows and as education is available to people,” said Hughes, who can augment her revenue stream with basic engineering services. “It really grows because corporate-level folks and the board-of-directors-level folks think this is something we have to investigate and do.”

The 44-year-old veteran of Cardinal

Engineering understands the challenge her startup faces in a conservative state whose senior U.S. senator has long scoffed at global warming and other environmental hot spots.

“This part of country has less of an environmentalism mentality,” said Hughes, who helped sell Cardinal in January after two decades with the firm. “In Oklahoma, I am probably on closer to the bleeding edge rather than the leading edge of this. If we were on the coasts, there’s lots of companies doing what I would like to do. There’s nobody doing this exclusively in Oklahoma.”

Her 600-square-foot office at 3227 E. 31st St. has signed up three clients since its Sept. 29 launch. Her strategy involves teaching business leaders what Hughes calls the triple bottom line – people, planet, profit.

“It’s really looking for solutions

that don’t sacrifice one for the other,” she said.

Third Branch would then provide third-party consulting services or training and implementation strategies to help clients establish in-house environmental operations.

“To me, companies are always better when they are driving their own train,” she said.

Adopting these purposes affects more than a client’s so-called good neighbor community image, Hughes said. It also reflects efforts to obtain and maintain younger workers who care deeply about such concerns, said [Mary Waller](#), a principal with Tulsa’s Waller and Co. public relations firm.

“Sometimes it’s about looking at your own company and figuring out it’s a whole new thought process,” Waller said. “There’s not a function within a

company that says, ‘Look beyond that. How can we do it differently and exceed compliance or procure that in a different way?’”

Activist shareholders also have driven company concerns, Hughes said. More than 400 such environmental issues were brought forward at U.S. shareholder meetings last year, about eight times the number seen in 2012, she said.

“There are companies out there training and treating institutional investors how to write a shareholder proposal and how to bring environmental concerns to a shareholder prospective,” she said.

Third Branch will use both fixed-price contracts and hourly fees, depending on the service. She maintained a low initial investment by meeting many office needs with assets she already owned, Hughes said.

“It gives me the time and space to really go build this dream,” she said.



Deanne Dutton Hughes