

BUSINESS

Workplace

watercooler

Brown Bag series resumes

Flathead Job Service opens its Blueprint for Business Success brown bag series from noon to 1 p.m. on Sept. 12 at Flathead Valley Community College.

The first panel discussion is presented by the Society for Human Resource Management and is called "HR Advice for Small Businesses: Because What You Don't Know Could Cost You."

Maria Gilman manages the Kalispell branch of LC Staffing and will speak about recruiting best practices; Warren Tolley, executive director of human resources at Flathead Valley Community College, will talk about conflict resolution in the workplace; and Angela Jacobs, of the firm Hammer, Hewitt, Jacobs and Quinn, will talk about employment law.

The session is in the Arts & Technology Building, room 139. There is no cost to attend.

Please RSVP with Terry Hauter, 758-6279 or email thaueter@mt.gov

ZaneRay earns top recognition

The ZaneRay Group of Whitefish placed 10th on Outside Magazine's fifth annual "Best Places to Work" list for 2012.

Outside's "Best Places to Work" project celebrates the innovative companies setting a new standard for a healthy work-life balance. The list was compiled with the help of the Outdoor Industry Association and Best Companies Group.

"I like to think of ZaneRay as a team of idealists. Put passion into your work and the place you work and you will be successful," Reed Gregerson, president of ZaneRay, said. "We feel honored to be one of Outside's top places to work. This is also an award that recognizes the kind of success we at ZaneRay value: challenging, decent paying jobs, adventure and a family life, in a place that others dream about visiting."

ZaneRay has 16 employees. Visit www.outsideonline.com for the complete list or www.zaneray.com for more information.

Learn how to document job behavior

The Professional Development Center, Montana Department of Administration, is offering the course "Documenting Disciplinary Action" Sept. 12, 8:30 a.m. to noon, at La Quinta Inn in Kalispell.

The workshop will discuss how, what and when to document employees' behavior on the job. Participants will learn about different types of documentation and critical aspects of legally defensible documentation. Attorneys can pick up 3 ethics CLE credits for attending.

Tuition is \$95. Discounts are available for multiple people from the same organization.

Sponsored by the Professional Development Center, the training arm of the Montana Department of Administration, the workshop will be led by John Moore, the center's director. Moore has 35 years of experience as a trainer, with a focus on legal issues of employment and management.

People planning to attend the workshop should preregister by calling the Professional Development Center at 444-3871 or email pdcc01@mt.gov.

Clean and sustainable



ERIC REED of Whitefish smells a bar of Sope during the Whitefish Farmers Market.



Patrick Cote photos/Daily Inter Lake

BARS OF soap line the table of the Amalgamated Sope Company's booth Tuesday at the Whitefish Farmers Market.

Sope makers focus on local, organic sources

By HEIDI GAISER

The Daily Inter Lake

When Brian Cole began working at Third Street Bars in Whitefish about three years ago, bars of the Whitefish-made product Sope were almost an afterthought in the store's promotional scheme, wrapped in a simple paper jacket on an out-of-the-way shelf.

Now, Sope and the Amalgamated Sope Company's other products, Salve and Arnica Oil, are getting the star treatment. An eye-catching display fills an area near the store's two main registers. A shelf-length backcard, with information highlighting the organic and local nature of the products, plus a picture of Sope maker Jen Elden, complements and draws attention to the arrangement.

"She (Elden) started asking questions about how to promote her products, what changes she could make," Cole said. "She was inquisitive and wanted to improve. She has really sought counsel from a number of people that she's been able to bounce ideas off, and consequently, she's doing a terrific job."

The store is not playing favorites with a local company — the products have earned their prime spot, Cole said.

"It definitely pays for its space, no doubt about that," Cole said. "We get lots of compliments and comments about it. Some people say it's the only soap they use."

Since Elden first sold her homemade soaps from a basket at the Whitefish Farmers Market, she and her husband, Dave, had made great strides toward achieving the dream that Sope becomes a staple product in households across Montana. After the Eldens spent the last year aggressively pursuing retail outlets, Sope products are now displayed in 40 stores, with locations throughout Montana, as well as Washington, Oregon, Idaho, California, Arizona and British Columbia.

The Amalgamated Sope Company, which operates out of a workshop at the Elden family home in Whitefish, is focused on some basic principles. The core philosophies are listed succinctly on the label of each bar of Sope:

"Keep it simple. Use local and organic ingredients whenever possible. Small batches. Minimal packaging. Nothing artificial, no 'unpronounceables.'"

The company's anchor product is Sope, a line of seven "flavors" of organic natural bar soap made with safflower oil, coconut and palm oils and pure essential oils, and either herbs harvested from the Eldens' home garden or organic exfoliants.

Salve, made for protection and healing of skin ailments, comes in two styles, "All Purpose" and "Super Healing." It is made with the herbs calendula and comfrey, shea butter, beeswax and vitamin E.

Arnica Oil is made from arnica flowers



JEN ELDEN, owner of Amalgamated Sope Company, poses for a portrait at her booth at the Whitefish Farmers Market.

infused in jojoba oil and vitamin E. It is sold with a roller ball applicator and is applied to muscles and joints to help reduce swelling, bruising and inflammation.

When Elden, 38, began making soap, a craft she learned after taking a class from a friend, she was using organic olive oil. She was happy to learn that safflower oil was a quality substitute. She found a Montana supplier of organic safflower oil through a family farm on the east side of the state.

"It's a big deal that the majority of the oil is Montana grown," she said. "The fact that it's certified organic means it's good for your skin, and good for the land."

Elden spent 10 years working for Montana Coffee Traders, which gave her the retail experience and pragmatism to develop a solid business plan for her current venture.

"I was exposed to a lot with Coffee Traders," she said. "Production, sales, customer service. Good customer service is a huge part of what we offer."

Elden has been the principle salesperson since the company began about seven years ago, though the Eldens recently made their first hire, a salesperson on commission. Dave Elden has been the marketer, building a website and shooting high-quality photos for promotional material. The Eldens realize the importance of creating the right image through design, having a professional graphic designer create the packaging for the products.

"We wanted the product to be a stand-alone sales piece," Jen Elden said.

Because they turn Montana-grown safflower oil into a value-added agricultural product, the Amalgamated Sope Company

has received state grant money through the Growth Through Agriculture program, part of the Department of Agriculture. One mini-grant was to assist with the purchase of new boxes for Sope, which are printed in Bozeman from 100 percent recycled materials. Another was to create a point-of-purchase box for Salve, which comes in containers too compact for display in single units.

The Eldens also have received a substantial boost through the state's Trade Show Assistance Program, giving them financial help in attending the National Products Expo Northwest in Seattle in October 2011 and the much bigger National Products Expo West in Anaheim, Calif., as part of a delegation of nine Montana companies, in March 2012.

"That was amazing exposure," Jen Elden said. "Sixty-thousand people went through the convention center in three days. Some marketing experts gave us the thumbs up — they stopped by and said we had a great product."

As a result of the show, the Amalgamated Sope Company has a launch date planned with a significant out-of-state company on Oct. 1. Elden said that after focusing on the Montana market for a year, the company's ambition is to grow regionally and nationally — but not lose sight of its values.

"We want to proceed with intention so it's sustainable," she said. "We don't want to be out of control, but want it to be significant enough to support our family and hopefully create more jobs."

For more information or to order Amalgamated Sope Company products online, visit www.sopeshop.com.