

## PureChoice in Burnsville has Nose for business

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Company is marketing its air-quality sensors to track heating and cooling, boosting clients' energy efficiency and its sales.

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PureChoice CEO Bryan Reichel, far left, Chief Operating Officer Kevin Kuhne, standing next to him, and others surround a table of partially assembled Noses at the company's Burnsville headquarters. Below: PureChoice monitors are getting traction for their ability to save clients energy by dialing back the thermostats on heating or cooling systems in the right rooms at the right time. (Pioneer Press: John Doman)

An 18-year-old Burnsville company that develops high-tech sensors to sniff the air in offices and factories believes it is smelling its biggest sales year yet.

For that, it can thank a wave of interest by businesses for cheaper and easier ways to save energy than retrofitting their buildings.

PureChoice, a company that began in 1992, has developed data collection systems using electronic "noses" to measure temperature, humidity and carbon dioxide, among other gases, in the indoor environment.

The data is stored on PureChoice servers, where customers ranging from hotels to child-care centers can log in and see the results.

The company has marketed its air-quality monitoring system, called PureTrac, as an environmentally friendly health service for years. But its newest version, finished in 2008, is getting traction for its ability to save clients energy the same way a family does at home — simply by dialing back the thermostat on heating or cooling systems in the right rooms at the right time.

For instance, HEI Hotels and Resorts, a chain of 30 brand-name hotels that includes the Westin in Minneapolis, saved \$900,000 in energy costs and won a national energy-efficiency award last year, in large part because of PureChoice's system.

One example of that savings, said Bob Holesko, HEI's vice president of facilities, occurred last summer when he saw that one of his hotel ballrooms in Florida was 66 degrees sitting empty at 2 a.m.

That was wasted energy. The room had an overnight set-back of 76 degrees but something was off, Holesko said.

"I call it my 'Big Brother,' " he said. Some of his hotels have room thermostats that are adjusted manually, while others are supposed to adjust the temperatures automatically, but the PureChoice system gives him and his hotel engineers the ability to see what actually happens.

Bursts of data get transmitted via broadband every five minutes, and he can monitor all his hotels from his office in Norwalk, Conn.

He spent \$5,400 on the PureChoice service, getting the \$400 devices for free as an early adopter, and he prefers that to spending \$10,000 to \$20,000 for systems tied directly to his chillers or boilers.

"That was the best \$5,400 I spent all last year," he said.

The Westin in Minneapolis saved 15.6 percent on its energy costs and about \$60,000 last year, making it the top energy-saver in the group, Holesko said.

Holesko cannot specify how much of the \$900,000 in total energy savings he could attach to PureChoice, but he gives it a lot of credit.

PureChoice is projecting sales of \$5 million this year, up from \$875,000 last year, CEO Bryan Reichel said. The company could turn its first profit in early 2011, he said.

That is welcome news to long-term investors like Richard Perkins Sr., owner of Perkins Capital Management in Wayzata. Perkins sits on the board with Reichel.

"The business model is identical to the burglar-alarm business model," Perkins, 79, said. "You pay for it, and you hope you never hear from them."

Chad Dunkley, chief operating officer of Plymouth-based New Horizon Academy, a chain of 60 child-care centers in Minnesota, uses the PureChoice system for safety reasons as well as energy savings.

A monitor once showed slightly elevated levels of carbon monoxide at one center near a busy highway. The level was well within safe limits but it allowed staffers to act before it became a problem, Dunkley said.

They found someone had turned off the heating-ventilation-air-conditioning system and simply forgot to turn it back on, Dunkley said.

The federal government used the system to help it evaluate energy efficiency efforts at the Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building at Fort Snelling outside Minneapolis, and large corporations are tinkering with it, too.

At Colgate-Palmolive's 450,000-square-foot Global Technology Center in Piscataway, N.J., engineers are using 52 PureChoice monitors to collect data on everything from temperature and humidity to carbon dioxide and volatile organic chemicals emitted from flavors and fragrances used by research scientists, said Mike Burke, director of the center's environmental occupational health and safety.

To help the scientists, Burke is toying with the idea of issuing a daily indoor weather report based on the data.

"We're only beginning to scratch the surface in terms of all this useful data," he said.

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