

Taking The Heat...

Freely

By Jeane Manning

BIZ IN BRIEF

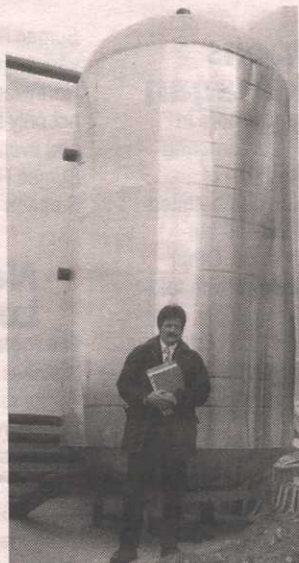


PHOTO by Jeane Manning

SST president Roger Huber stands in front of the heat exchanger and storage tank, the heart of the system.

Name of company: Swiss Solar Tech Ltd.

Gross annual sales: \$350,000. in first year of operation

Number of employees: 10-12

Type of business: Design, engineering and installation of solar water heating systems

Type of company: Incorporated private company

Head Office Location: Summerland

CEO/Manager: Founder and president Roger Huber

Business origin: Switzerland in 1985, expanded company to Canada Oct. 2000, and settled in Summerland May 2001

Swiss technology at work in the Okanagan economy

After less than two years in the Okanagan, Swiss Solar Tech (SST) is making a splash in the hot-water industry.

Recently the newcomer built one of the largest solar-thermal systems in Canada. Using heat-recovery and -storage hardware along with the sun, it's expected to make up to 95% of the hot water used by Kelowna's 147-room Best Western Inn in summer and nearly 80% in winter, shaving the hotel's natural gas bill. The system uses waste heat from the hotel's 100-tonne chiller to preheat water, and will soon add warmth vented from laundry dryers.

Cooperators, not competitors

In a competitive world, you'd think the new guy would use this media opportunity to stomp on rivals. Not so. SST president Roger Huber says, "Any competitor has the chance to do what we did, with the right components and sizing..." He indicates he'd rather be talking about "cooperators" than "competitors". With rising costs of natural gas, he expects more solar water-heating business than SST could handle alone. The company is getting calls for estimates on projects ranging from homes to a hospital.

Existing plumbers are the best people to contact their own loyal customers and offer such highly efficient systems using SST solar panels, Huber adds. Or other solar suppliers can do the same, he says, using SST's design and engineering services and the supplier's own products, "and maybe just add more panels".



PHOTO courtesy of Best Western

Swiss Solar Tech's solar panels on the roof of the Best Western Inn in Kelowna should provide 95% of the hotel's water needs in summer, 80% in winter.

Free & frugal funding

Best Western will pay \$220,000 for its system, but a \$55,000 rebate cheque to the hotel from National Resources Canada's Renewable Energy Deployment Initiative (REDI) program will help. After the energy savings pays for the system - usually less than six years, solar heat is free.

Solar systems scale down. "Less collectors and smaller storage tank, less price," says SST administrator Susan Huber. "We want to make it economical for the customer." A mid-sized motel's solar water heating system is about \$40,000, while a small one like the hostel in Penticton was \$15,000. SST had a customer who wanted to knock down trees when told solar space heating isn't economical because his business is shaded in winter. The Hubers could have sold more panels, but instead suggested he just recover wasted heat, for heating water.

Manufacturing diversity

Although proud of SST laser-welded solar panels invented by his mentor in Switzerland, Huber also welcomes competing manufacturers. More innovators vying to capture the sun's heat results in more incentive to improve panels.

Solar panels create only part of the high efficiencies of their systems, Susan Huber emphasizes. Custom designing, engineering, high-tech insulation and the right heat exchanger in the storage tank are crucial. "The tank is the heart of the system." SST chooses high-quality materials "because after the system has paid for itself in energy savings, we want our customers to have 30 more years of free solar heat".

History

Roger Huber was a marketing consultant before learning the solar-thermal business in Switzerland from a man with extraordinary dedication to the environment. The Hubers emigrated because Canada provides more room to grow, as a business and personally. Business advisors insisted they locate in Toronto, but the young couple didn't want to raise children in a metropolis. Instead they chose Kamloops, the hottest city in Canada. While there, they discovered the Okanagan and liked it even better. Six months later they moved to Summerland. "Wineries are here because of the sunshine and so are we."

Given their views on cooperation and clean energy, "ambition" is less precise in describing this couple's wish for a solar-heated future, than the word "mission".