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Planet Natural's booming
online organics business goes
brick-and-mortar



Home of Planet Natural
planetnatural.com



Eric Vinje, owner of Planet Natural, says his new retail store is set to open around the end of October.

Cosmic shift

BY ALEX TENENBAUM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

Planet Natural's booming online organics business goes brick-and-mortar

DRIVE NORTH ON ROUSE PAST THE FAIRGROUNDS, PAST THE ECO-CHIC SHOPPING CENTER AND THROUGH THE GREY PORTAL OF OVERPASS AND RAILROAD TRACKS. It's there to the right, back behind Mr. T's Towing, next to the food bank and the heaps of colorful rusting farm equipment that once belonged to our grandfathers.

For a nationwide empire of organic gardening supplies, it doesn't look like much — just a pale yellow complex including an old yellow home, a yellow metal-sided warehouse and some grain elevators out back. But for 20 years, this has been the ever-growing home of Planet Natural.

The parking lot, a glorified driveway, leads to the home-turned-office-build-

ing's two-car garage, flung wide and piled to the ceiling with boxes of merchandise. Past the garage, a small door opens onto Planet Natural's crowded maze of a sales floor, crammed with boxes and bags and jugs of things most people have never considered purchasing, things like Neem Oil, Manure Worms, Milky Spore Disease, and Jamaican Bat Guano.

Up a wooden staircase, past a library of shelves of kitschy hot-sauce bottles, Phish's repetitive jam-band melodies emanate from the owner's office. Eric Vinje sits in this hidden corner with his back to the door, hammering at a keyboard while he updates the website. Sure, it's easy to find the place on the web — planetnatural.com gets over 750,000 visits per month in the high season — but tucked back in this corner of the universe, the physical store might as well be in a different orbit.

"We've been around for 20 years, and my mom's golf friends haven't even heard of us back here," Vinje says.

Exposure is certainly a problem, but so is zoning. By law, the organics merchant has to sell most of its products online and by mail-order, so Vinje has not been able to advertise or draw local customers lest retail sales account for too much of the revenue. But even without those hurdles, Planet Natural's fractured 6,000 square feet, supplemented by nine of Osterman's Mini Warehouses, are still choking on an inventory of 1,400 different products.

"We worry about people tripping on boxes," he says.

The company has maxed out its space, so Vinje is boldly going where he's never gone before, planting the Planet Natural flag on a building geared for retail.

The old yellow complex that has worked so well in cyberspace, and proven such a hindrance to retail, will remain the base of online and mail-order operations. In-store shopping will move out past the decaying farm equipment, past the food bank and back through the grey portal of overpass and train tracks to the eco-chic shopping center at Rouse and Oak. Vinje bought the inviting and spacious building across from the Daily Coffee Bar and the Natural Baby Company, and began transforming it into an airy temple to organic gardening. Offering traffic, visible signage and a trendy shopping atmosphere, it's three-tenths of a mile and a world away.

"I've been driving past this building for 20-plus years. I was here back when it was a hardware store and I loved it then," he says. "It feels like we're writing a lot of checks these days. We flew in a retail design specialist from San Diego to help with the layout. He's the same guy doing the NASCAR Hall of Fame."

The business wasn't always a juggernaut hiring expert designers, doubling square footage at will. Vinje bought the company, then called Bozeman Biotech, in 1989 when it only offered a single product: grasshopper bait. Quickly realizing he had to sell more to make more, he added products by the boatload, focusing first on beneficial insects like lady bugs and praying mantises that customers, primarily farmers, could order from the company's flimsy black-and-white newsprint catalog.

Even in the early '90s, Vinje's catalogues offered how-to advice on rudimentary organic gardening practices.

"Back then, a very few people were starting to talk organic, but no one really knew how to do it," he says. It started out as a fringe activity for a small and devoted core of environmentalists. Out in the parking lot, he smiles and says, "My clientele is driving Hummers now. Hummers and Audis."

In its second incarnation, the company changed names to become Planet Natural, the product line expanded to include organic body products and then-novelty compact fluorescent light bulbs, along with organic fertilizers. The marketing focus shifted from farmers to homeowners who didn't want to use harsh chemicals, and the catalogs went to full-color and glossy.

Still, without the proliferation of the Internet, finding new products was difficult.

"Back then, my God, you'd have to buy a product from a competing catalog to see if it was even something that would work, to try to figure out if it was really natural. Then you'd just hope it had a label so you could contact the supplier. With the web, all you have to do is type it in," he says.

The Internet has been good to Planet Natural. Even vague Google searches put Planet Natural at the top. At the time this goes to press, a search for "organic gardening" has Planet Natural in the number four spot, "tomato gardening" the three spot, and "gardening supplies" the two spot. Google "beneficial insects" and Planet Natural is at number one. Nearly 85 percent of the site's 10,000-25,000 daily visits come from Google searches.

"Within the last five to six years, the Internet site began to explode. We're getting 30-50 percent revenue growth per year," Vinje says. "Year to date, we've processed 32,000 orders online, and we're one of FedEx's largest shippers in the state."

The success and high search rankings are due in part to a large site — over 4,000 pages — that offers more than just a shopping cart. *continued*

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COSMIC SHIFT CONTINUED

Planetnatural.com acts as a hub for dozens of Vinje-created educational sites like composting101.com and organiclawncare101.com, each containing multiple articles on their respective subjects, and all of them providing links to relevant products at the Planet Natural store. The information is so helpful that the EPA used to link to the 101 pages when it wasn't against policy to promote private companies.

As Planet Natural expands, Vinje says education in the form of a knowledgeable staff, of which he currently has 11, will be key. He also plans to run classes and workshops on organic horticulture and hydroponics.

Jennifer Rowntree, owner of the organic landscaping company Rowntree Landscapes, has shopped at Planet Natural since it was Bozeman Biotech, purchasing beneficial insects for her own garden and later for those of her clients. Over the years, her buying has grown with the selection.

"The only things I haven't bought from them are indoor gardening supplies, hydroponics and the like," she says. "My most recent purchase was an hour ago. I bought the biggest compost tumbler I could get for one of my clients."

She says that without Planet

Natural, she would have to rely on chemical fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides instead of her preferred natural options, like corn gluten meal for weed control and manures and liquefied fish for fertilizing.

"Planet Natural has allowed me to follow my belief in using natural products and helping other people become aware that they have alternatives. The knowledgeable staff, and especially Eric, they've answered a lot of questions for me. Without Planet Natural, I don't think I'd be able to promote natural gardening," she says.

Rowntree is excited for the new location because of easier access and parking. She says it will be a great addition to the center that already hosts Refuge Sustainable Building. But more than that, she looks forward to using the loading dock.

"I might actually go there more," she says. "It's easier. I'll be able to drive up to the loading dock and throw in the bagged goods, the heavy stuff, more easily."

Vinje is just eager to get the new location up and running. He seems to feel as though he is creating a market, one without competition.

"Online I think of competition, but locally not so much," he says. "We're not going to do live plants or anything, and there's nobody doing anything specifically with our niche. We've been crunching the numbers like crazy and it's really exciting, you know. It's a big step. I don't sleep much."

Vinje hopes to open the new store by the end of October.



Eric Vinje checks out his new store space recently, located near the corner of Oak and Rouse.

Alex Tenenbaum is managing editor of Business to Business.