

# Specialty fabrics Review

*Industry experts since 1915*

Awnings and Shades  
Geosynthetics  
Graphics  
Lightweight Structures  
Marine  
Protective: Safety and Medical  
Tents and Temporary Shelters  
Transportation and Automotive  
Truck Covers  
Upholstery

JUNE 2009 [www.specialtyfabricsreview.com](http://www.specialtyfabricsreview.com)

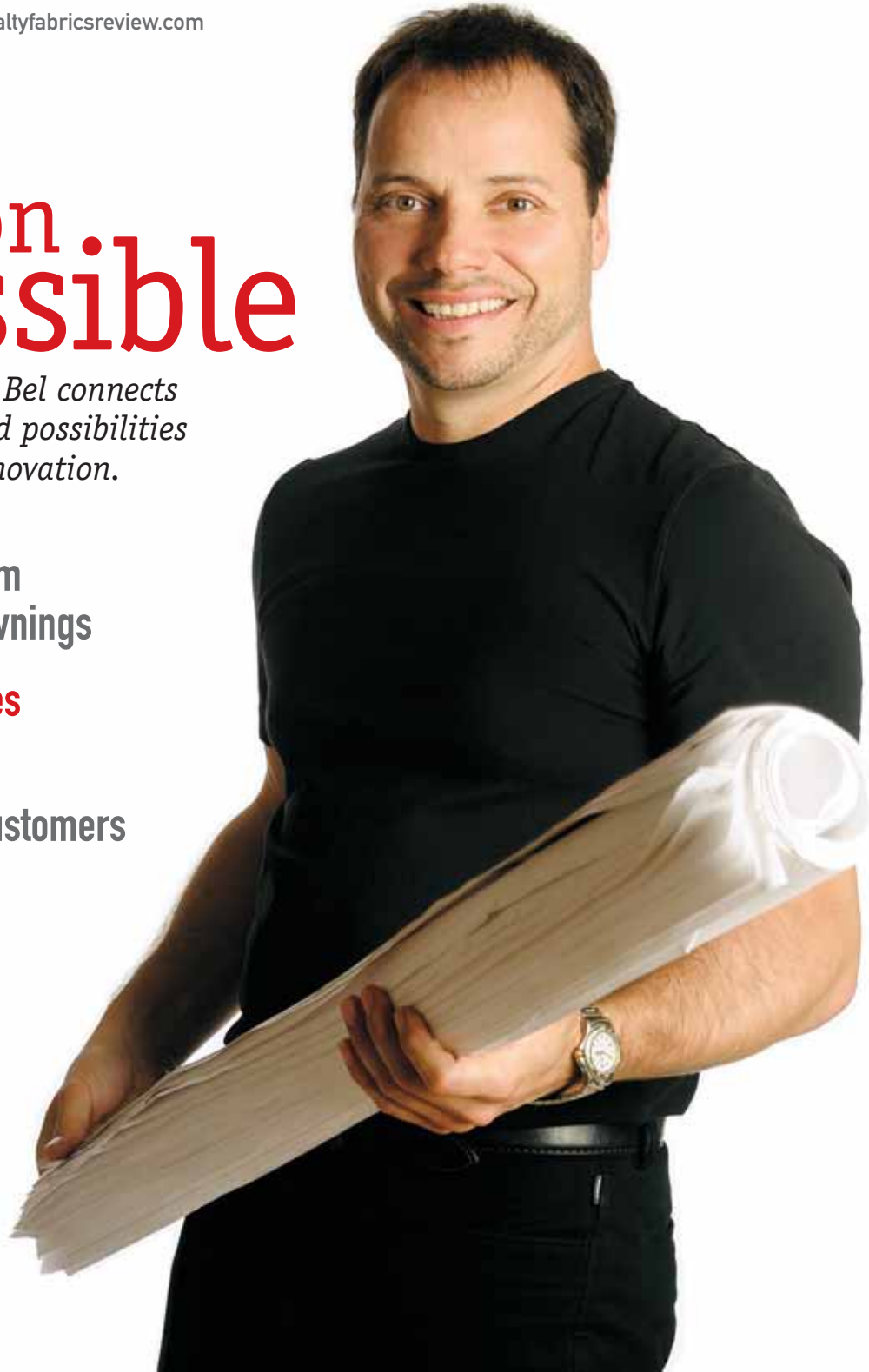
## Mission possible

*Claude Le Bel connects  
people and possibilities  
to fuel innovation.*

The coming boom  
in retractable awnings

New technologies  
in soft signage

Cut costs, not customers



# Mission *possible*

Claude Le Bel connects people and possibilities to fuel innovation.

“FOR ME, EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE. YOU JUST HAVE TO FIND THE RIGHT PERSON FOR THE JOB,” SAYS CLAUDE LE BEL, president and founder of Sollertia Inc. in Montréal, Quebec, Canada. Appropriately named Sollertia—which is Latin for ingenuity—the company serves as a consulting firm specializing in tensile fabric architecture and event planning.

Le Bel was educated as an electrician and started the company in 2000 after working as a technical director and tent master for Cirque du Soleil and as an independent contractor doing construction. “I was working in both residential and industrial construction, and on sets for film, television, and stadium events,” Le Bel says. “Everything was interesting to me. There was something for me everywhere.”

Photos: Yves Beaulieu.

# "IDEAS ARE A CAPITAL THAT BEARS INTEREST

## VITAL STATISTICS

Claude Le Bel

Sollertia Inc.

Montréal, Quebec, Canada

Since 2000

A consulting firm specializing in tensile fabric architecture and event planning

IFAI member since 2001

[www.sollertia.ca](http://www.sollertia.ca)

## *Favorite book from childhood*

*I can't remember a book that marked my childhood but what does stick out is the time I spent with my father. From the age of five I worked with him on renovations and building our cottage. He was my book.*



## It's what you know

Le Bel has taken his wide variety of interests and experiences and has created a sort of mental warehouse upon which he draws to solve problems that arise in the business. "Doing so many different things gives me a different point of view when I'm looking at a problem," he says. "Sometimes I will find a solution from the film industry or from the circus industry. For instance, I'll think about the way we would hang the trapeze in the circus and use that technique for a fabric structure."

Those solutions aren't always arrived at quickly, though. Three and a half years ago, Cirque du Soleil asked Le Bel to find a way to clean tents on-site in a manner that would be both effective and safe for the fabric. Normally, cleaning tent fabric when it's not in use isn't a problem, but cleaning a tent when it's erected is more of a challenge. Three years after the request, Le Bel came up with a solution. "I found that the solution was to use low-pressure steam, though at the time there was no machine like that on the market," Le Bel says. "There was high-pressure steam, but [without the pressure] what you had was just hot water. All the manufacturers of steam machines in Canada, the States and Europe were all saying that what I was looking for was impossible."

## It's who you know

That's the point where most of us stop—the "I have a solution but the technology doesn't exist so I'll just move on place"—and that's the place where Le Bel pushes forward, although it took him three years to fully realize a solution. He looked outside of himself and outside of the industry for help. "I found Maurice Morin, a guy I knew. I called him and asked him if he worked with steam before and he said, 'yeah,'" Le Bel says. "I hired him, and we found the solution ourselves."

And that's where the people portion of the equation comes in—"there's a guy I know." Le Bel places value in being connected to people, whether they are people in his family, people in the industry or people he's encountered along the way. No one is discounted, and that's what ultimately provides value to the business—and Le Bel's life. "I'm just curious," he says. "I love to share my own experience and knowledge. And when you give a lot, you receive a lot."

One of the ways Le Bel gives to the industry is by occasionally taking on jobs that no one else wants. And although he's had many challenging installations during the course of his career, both in fabric architecture and event planning, his first was perhaps the most memorable. It was 1989 when the 25-year-old Le Bel was called upon to replace the tent

## *sf* Review asks *What is your...?*

### INDUSTRY PREDICTION

*Almost everyone is or will be affected by the economic downturn, but companies that are strong and have the necessary knowledge will survive.*

### BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY

*If you're honest, fair and take care of people, everything is possible.*

# ONLY IN THE HANDS OF TALENT."

~ANTOINE RIVAROL

master for the Cirque du Soleil North American tour based in Miami, which was already in progress. The original tent master had left the project and Le Bel was parachuted in to take over. The crews displayed their loyalty to the original tent master by stonewalling Le Bel. When he asked them for suggestions as to where to start with the project, one crew member said: "Hey, you're the tent master. You're supposed to know what to do." It was a rocky start, but eventually Le Bel earned their respect. Not, however, until he stood his ground, threatening to unload all the trailers on the ground to see what was inside if the crew didn't start cooperating.

## It's how you lead

Part of what makes Le Bel successful in dealing with difficult situations is that he balances taking a tough stand with making an effort to understand the mindset of the people he's leading, and gives them time to adjust to his goals. "When you come to put a project straight, [the people already working on it] are afraid of what you're going to do," Le Bel says. "And what they're most afraid of is that you're going to change things that will, in turn, change the way they work. So you need to take time to ask them how they work, what they're doing, and what they think the problem is. Then they feel more comfortable that they'll be part of the solution."

And according to Le Bel, there's always a solution. "If someone says to me 'no, it's not possible' to me that sounds like I don't have the right person," he says. "I might say, 'Fine. You take care of this part and I'll find somebody else for the other part.'" And Le Bel will work alongside whoever that right person is until they find the answer. "I love to see people from different industries sitting around the table working together to find one, single solution," he says.

*That is ingenuity. ®*

### BUSINESS STRENGTH

*Being curious and having connections in many different industries.*

### MOST UNUSUAL PROJECT

*It's always the last one I completed.*



## EDUCATION STATION

Investing in the education of others is one of Claude Le Bel's passions. In November 2008 Le Bel and others from Sollertia traveled to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in West Africa to install a circus school for the city's youth. Le Bel and his team volunteered their time to do the drawings, foundation and project design for the site, then located a used fabric structure and installed it.

Currently, the Sollertia crew is working on plans for the interior, including dressing rooms, restrooms and offices. The third phase of the project will include an outdoor playground for the students and the community. "Before they had been playing and teaching in the street," Le Bel says. "Now, even though it is not finished, they are using the school. Now they have shade."