

TEEL PLASTICS INC.

www.teel.com / Revenue: \$60 million / HQ: Baraboo, Wis. / Employees: 260 / Tom Thompson, president: "Our technology allows us to bring innovative products to the markets we serve."



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HIGH EXPECTATIONS

TEEL PLASTICS' TECHNOLOGY ENSURES CUSTOMERS' NEEDS ARE MET EVERY TIME. BY JANICE HOPPE-SPIERS

For 65 years, Teel Plastics has specialized in custom extruded plastic tubing, cores and profiles. Significant investment in technology has been the company's value proposition, allowing it to diversify to serve new markets and differentiate itself among the competition.

"We have a high degree of technology at Teel Plastics in various platforms, including compounding, extrusions and the analytical lab," President Tom Thompson says. "Our technology allows us to bring innovative products to the markets we serve."

Since its founding in 1951, the Baraboo, Wis.-based company has always been family owned. Teel Plas-

tics was established as Insemikit Co., specializing in the manufacturing and distribution of agricultural implements and tools for the veterinary and emerging livestock artificial insemination industry.

In 1958, the company changed its name to Teel Plastics and became a manufacturer of liquid leak proof sampling bags used in laboratories around the world. Current owner Jay Smith and his family acquired the company in 1999 and redefined the business's strategic direction. New corporate objectives focused on talent, supply chain management, customer-focused innovation and continuous improvement.

Today, Teel Plastics focuses on technology-driven products and serving new markets with several unique product families in each. "We try to diversify on purpose so we aren't tucked into one market," Thompson says. "Some of our bigger markets include healthcare, automotive, cosmetics, water filtration and treatment, fiber optic and lab sampling."

IMPLEMENTING TECHNOLOGY

Teel Plastics' customers expect a "dock to stock" product from the company every time. "Their expectation is that every time we produce and ship a product out, they don't have to do an incoming inspection and the product can go right to the production floor to be assembled at the original equipment manufacturer," Thompson explains.

Customers continue to expect tighter tolerances even on products Teel Plastics made 20 to 25 years ago, Thompson says. "Our customers and our customers' customers want tighter tolerances, more engineered-type products for example, ones that can handle heat to get better performance," he adds. "They have greater expectations than just quality. They want to put the product right into manufacturing on their floor without having problems and at the lowest total cost possible."

To meet all of its customers' demands, Teel Plastics continues to invest in technology to move toward Industry 4.0, the automation and data exchange in manufacturing technologies. "We are looking at our process out on our floor and tying it into the ERP system," Thompson says. "Data comes from the equipment on the floor, such as parts produced and other key factors, is downloaded into the ERP system

and we can track how well we are doing from a quality and input standpoint.”

Online gauging equipment provides immediate feedback on parts produced, measurements and attributes the customers require. “We get that feedback right on the line and we have to have that data to know how well it’s processing instead of having employees measure offline,” Thompson says. “You get variation in offline measurements when they are done manually. Instead we measure right online because being precise is key to what we do.”

INCREASING EFFICIENCY

Teel Plastics began implementing automation about three years ago by introducing more robotics into its process. The company is a custom manufacturer, so the use of automation on every job doesn’t make sense. “Robotics comes in for the longer runs because it increases efficiency and productivity,” Thompson notes. “Some operations are more prone to repetitive motion injuries, so we have also been able to eliminate those with robotics, which also results in a more precise, repeatable system and process.”

As a custom manufacturer, downstream equipment is pulled on and off production lines, which requires a skilled team. Scheduling and having teams ready are critical to smooth transitions. “We have good storage in a nice, neat area where all the equipment and tooling is found,” Thompson says. “It is most important for tooling to be ready and available and the schedule to be available so everyone is aware of what will run next.”

Teel Plastics ensures it has the best team possible through an in-house computerized training system for employees to take at their leisure. “That gives them rudimentary knowledge of the extrusion process,” Thompson explains. “We also have a check list for each one of our 260 employees so they know what they need to learn and once they have completed the check list they can gain a higher position.”

EXPANDED OFFERINGS

Teel Plastics recently began injection molding, which Thompson says is a natural progression for the company. “It’s something we feel that could be a platform for us to grow into in the future,” he adds. “Injection molding, our extrusion technology and knowledge results in nice product offerings for our customers.”

To accommodate this new platform, Teel Plastics in-

vested in injection molding machines and added employees to operate them. “To get things started, we have an engineering group with experience in injection molding, and we were more comfortable moving forward because of the employee experience we can leverage,” Thompson says. “Our suppliers have been helpful and helping with training programs, which is a big asset to get us going on the platform.”

Moving forward, Teel Plastics plans to continue achieving its aggressive growth goals of 10 to 20 percent each year from a sales perspective. The company is evaluating its acquisition options in the plastic extrusion market, as well as possible expansion. “We are seeing what comes first,” Thompson says. “We may not want to expand and acquire a company at the same time because it’s a lot of work and we have to find the resources.”

The company in 2015 received Wisconsin’s Manufacturer of the Year award. Teel Plastics focuses daily on living up to that recognition while always striving to do more, Thompson says. **mt**



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