Ahead Of The Pack

FP International brings decades of experience to cultivating a new green product line and an environmentally-friendly production process.

FP International's Hopkinsville facility is nestled in the industrial playground of Kentucky's blue hills. This packaging company's sprawl throughout the United States and Europe has made it a formidable name in the industry—one associated with both the past and the future of packaging innovation. And it all started with a drinking straw.

Historic Roots

FP International (FPI) founder and current CEO, Arthur Graham headed a company in the 1960s that produced soda fountain supplies, including paper straws. In an attempt to utilize the scrap "straw ends" (about three quarters of an inch of excess material per straw), Graham sold them to local businesses to use as packaging material. Thus, the dawn of loosefill—and the roots of Free-Flow Packaging Corporation, Graham's company which eventually became FPI.

Loosefill, more commonly identified these days as the "packing peanut," changed architecture with FPI's innovations over time. In 1968, the company developed an extrusion process which allowed for the product to be made out of expanded polystyrene.

In fact, FP International was such a pioneer in the packaging industry that it even designed the unique "figure 8" style packing peanut—a configuration which interlocks with other peanuts to reduce settling in the shipping process.

FPI's story can't be adequately told without this history lesson—namely, because of this expanded polystyrene peanut. Despite Styrofoam being typically associated with non-biodegradable environmental waste, FPI has actually proven to be a pioneer in the arena of recyclable packaging. By 1989, before "green" was buzzing in everyone's ears, the company had developed a recycling, or reclaim, system to allow use of post-consumer expanded polystyrene (EPS) packaging in its FLO-PAK loosefill. The company was the first to use recycled content in its loosefill, creating a new industry standard. (See sidebar on page 9 for more of FPI's environmental achievements.)

Qualities Of A Leader

Mr. Graham hasn't slowed down since. Now in his 80s, he's still involved in the day-to-day operations at FPI, and serves as a leader in the company's innovation initiatives.

"He's an engineer and he loves engineering, not only in our product side but also in our manufacturing side," says Randy Green, Marketing & Sales Administration for FPI. "He's pushed our engineers to develop creative products to address the packaging needs of our customers, and develop processes to be more efficient."

Adds Hopkinsville plant manager Jim Blair, "Mr. Graham has been innovative from day one, starting with the straws, and then actually developing the loosefill process. He really has been the driving force on the innovation side, always trying to stay ahead of our competitors."

Knowing Customer & Capacity

So besides strong leadership, what else is it that makes this company thrive? According to Blair and Green, its success may lie in anticipating the customer's needs, and not being afraid of the investments in equipment and ideas that meeting these needs might entail.

"Our goal is the optimal utilization of our equipment, so we try to look at what the maximum is that each piece of equipment can do, as well as the roadblocks to reaching that point. If we're measuring ourselves at one objective, we have to determine what roadblocks we need to remove to get to the next objective," says Blair. "Manufacturing and engineering will then get together and figure out if we need development there, or maybe we need to buy a piece of capital equipment. But it's much better to buy a piece of capital equipment rather than just holding that line at capacity. It gets us closer to utilizing that equipment, and that's one of the main goals now—getting us close to that maximum potential.

"We're constantly upgrading," Blair adds. "We have a lot of fairly new equipment here. We make a lot of improvements, especially in our films and screw. We upgraded cooling systems to produce products at a higher rate, because cooling is naturally very important in the plastics operations." In other technology upgrades, rather than buy bubble packaging from a distributor, transport the lightweight but bulky material to a distribution center, store rolls of bubble losing valuable warehouse floor space and man-handle it into place for packing, the company utilizes a PILLOW PAK'R system, a machine which produces bubble on site, when it's needed.

"We are always thinking about the future, always listening to the customer to bring the best solutions to enhance their productivity and lighten the load from day to day annoyances. PILLOW PAK'R solved one enormous headache for them. Now they can make bubble material on-site, on demand, and eliminate costly transportation, handling, and storage of those bulky bubble rolls. It's a completely untraditional approach to what I perceived a simple solution," says Graham.

Management Of Ideas

"Our quality policy and our strategic plan are gone over with all employees in the company every three months," says Blair. "The executive staff come and iterate our strategic plan, part of which is that we will always meet or exceed our customers'

expectations, and also their future needs. Future needs are what are stressed for innovation. Let's worry about solving their problems that may occur down the road."

"We also have an ideas program where every employee who has an idea—whether it be a process improvement or a cost-saving initiative, etc.—can send that in, and that's evaluated and feedback is given to whomever sent in the idea, regardless of whether the idea is implemented or not," says Green. Part of the incentive plan behind this ideas program is a financial one. Employees are rewarded with bonuses if their ideas result in a plan being implemented. "It's often things that none of us would have thought of until they were brought forward by this person in a certain area, and the company is reaping the benefit from it, and so is the employee."

The Challenge Of Innovation

Still, innovation comes with its challenges—namely in the employees being charged with adapting to new production processes and testing procedures. "One of the biggest obstacles, being an innovative company like we are—we're always introducing new designs and new products, and a lot of that comes out of this plant," explains Blair. "The loosefill testing and quality has been around for a number of years and everybody knows that by heart. But every time a new air cushion design comes out, there's something new that we have to do with it. Even though it's typical of a lot of blown films, because of a lot of different configurations that we do, it does cause different problems, and cause us to do different types of tests. Sometimes, even as a company, we're learning new tests to implement ourselves. We are ISO 9001-2000 certified and we have been for a year and half, so we use those techniques, continuous improvement, corrective action, and a lot of preventative actions."

The company has had the benefit of using these ISO standards for consistency in training and work instructions. "We try to cross-train employees across the equipment, so they're having to learn different types of tests, but as they become more educated, it's easier for them to adapt and learn different tasks," says Blair. "We have very good employees and they adapt very well."

End Of Life Benefits

The onus of FPI's environmental product strategy is to look at the environmental product life cycle and the "end of life impact," says Green. Having a bevy of options for the product base— including petroleum- and plant-based materials— has meant a lot of research into the technologies that prove most viable over the long term. "It's about getting out there and researching technologies that are being used, and maybe not even in packaging, but in other industries," he says. "In addition, it's trying to keep abreast of the consumer trends that may be driving what the manufacturers are doing."

Sidebar: The Green In Polystyrene

FP International is a leading recycler of expanded polystyrene. The company has six

manufacturing facilities in the United States and four in the European Union.

Today, FPI has five recycling operations in the United States and recycles over six million pounds of expanded polystyrene packaging annually, approximately 15 percent of the national total. The company's subsidiary in the United Kingdom recycles approximately three million pounds of expanded polystyrene annually.

Since 1990 the company has recycled over 140 million pounds of expanded polystyrene, enough material to fill over 5,000 football fields, goalpost to goalpost, over one foot deep. In addition:

- FPI was first in its industry to phase out use of CFCs in its polystyrene loosefill and polyethylene foam manufacturing processes.
- The company also was the first to use waste polystyrene to make loosefill packaging, beginning in the early 1970s. Since the mid 1980s, the company has used only industrial and post-consumer material to make its loosefill packaging.
- FPI was the first to design and build a system to reprocess post-consumer polystyrene foam packaging for use in manufacturing.
- The company makes its loosefill packaging products (FLO-PAK® and SUPER 8® loosefill) from 100 percent recycled polystyrene.
- In 2008, FPI introduced the Green Family, a line of biodegradeable packaging products, including Super 8® loosefill and CELL-O® air cushions. Both are 100 percent biodegradable in the presence of microorganisms.

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