Grass Gets Greener

Anna Wells, Editor, IMPO

Briggs & Stratton is by no means an unrecognized name in the outdoor power equipment industry. In fact, the world's largest producer of air-cooled gasoline engines for outdoor power equipment, headquartered in Milwaukee, WI, developed the first lightweight aluminum engine in 1953, effectively planting the roots for the development of the mowers that now dominate today's lawn and garden industry.

What you might not know, is that "green" to Briggs & Stratton doesn't just mean grass. The company, founded in 1908, boasts a century old commitment to sustainability. In fact, says company president and COO Todd Teske, "we were doing sustainability before people were even calling it sustainability." Clearly that's nothing to scoff at when the past ten years have been rife with manufacturers getting newly hyped over the green buzz.

Grassroots Efforts

Perhaps the most impressive element to this company's historic green journey is the fact that the principles haven't changed—Briggs & Stratton is still on the cutting edge when it comes to energy efficiency initiatives.

"Even though a lot of people are jumping on the sustainability bandwagon right now, it's just a part of our culture. Our culture is—you do the right thing, not the easy thing. If the right thing is the easiest thing, then great. But you always do the thing that's right," says Teske. "A lot of that stems from saving costs and making sure we're giving consumers the right value. It's really a culture that continues to evolve, but it's been there since the company started."

This culture carries over into how Briggs deals with their customers from a product innovation standpoint—a process Teske describes as “getting the voice of the customer into our products.”

The company’s “Power Within” philosophy is designed to extend to both its operations and its products. As one of the first companies in the United States to treat and recycle wastewater from plating operations in the ‘70s, Briggs improved by installing ultra-filtration treatment equipment a decade later, to remove oils from machining and washer wastewater so that the oil could be re-used. The company recycles about 250,000 gallons of oil annually. Today, Briggs & Stratton has reduced hazardous waste by 90 percent. From a product side, the company has eliminated nearly 75 percent of smog-forming emissions in its engines since 1995.

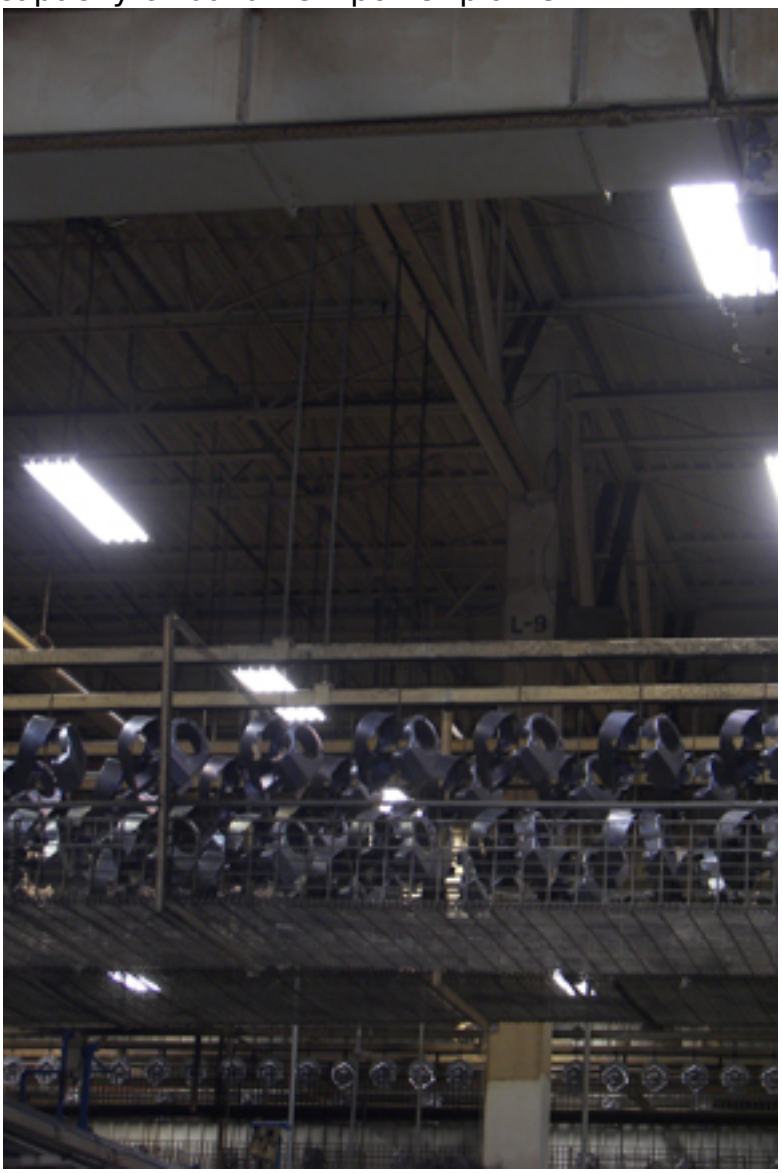
Sustainable Partnerships

One of the company’s more recent accolades came through a long-term relationship with Orion Energy Systems, the WI-based company who helped Briggs install a major lighting retrofit project—the success of which spurred Orion to honor Briggs with its Orion Energy Systems Environmental Stewardship Award. The Briggs & Stratton project entailed replacing inefficient high-intensity discharge lights at

eight facilities with Orion's Compact Modular™ high-intensity fluorescent lighting system, which is engineered to reduce energy consumption, costs, and the associated greenhouse gases.

As a result of the lighting retrofit, says Orion, the kilowatt-hour reduction is enough electricity to power 937 homes annually, is the air-scrubbing equivalent of a 1,536-acre forest, or equates to saving 766,937 gallons of gasoline a year.

The idea behind the Briggs & Stratton lighting project was to optimize the Orion technology's key benefits—employing the dual principles of optimizing input energy and maximizing lighting output. This, in effect, "is permanently reducing base load in the facility during peak hours," says Neal Verfuerth, president and CEO of Orion Energy Systems. From a long-term sustainability standpoint, he explains, this "lessens the upward pressure that exists on power prices and the need to add capacity or build new power plants."



For this technology, Orion received its own industry acclaim: The integrated system was honored with the Platts Global Energy Award for the single most innovative and sustainable technology of 2008.

Tying Cost-Benefit Together
Through the burgeoning relationship, the two companies hope to collaborate on other, more long-term projects. Even with all the green thumbs ups, both Teske and Verfuerth emphasize the importance of cost-effectiveness.

“We always look at cost benefit,” says Teske. “There are some things that I know people would like us to do, but they just don’t make sense from a cost-benefit perspective. We have to look at the end user—the consumer—to make sure they can afford it, and that it’s something that they want. There are lots of things that are out there that you have to look at. Oftentimes we can find a way from a cost-benefit perspective to make them work.”

“I started a non-profit a couple of years ago called E4,” adds Verfuerth. “It does our lobbying to bridge the gap between environmental stewardship and capitalism. Most people think of green as this touchy-feely thing. I feel very strongly that you can have both.”

A Sustainable Future
For both companies, being sustainability leaders has meant the lighting project may just be the first of many: “We see it as our responsibility to keep coming back with new ideas and new solutions. Lighting is just kind of the phase one,” says Verfuerth. “Once you save someone lots of money, your credibility goes up.”

In the same vein, Briggs has been able to use its position to work with other suppliers to help improve the overall responsibility of its supply chain. From a community standpoint, Briggs offers what the company refers to as “grassroots giving.” This includes community involvement such as park clean-up and hazardous waste collection. Internally, the company keeps employees involved through cross-training for improved development, as well as by continuing its goals with events like “Sustainability Week.”

In the end, Orion’s Verfuerth has high hopes for other company’s looking make an impact, in essence, by reducing their impact: “I think it’s part of all our responsibilities to be better stewards of the environment. I hope it becomes more than just the next ‘big thing,’ and it becomes ingrained in people’s everyday lives, their culture, and the way they operate their businesses.”

Guiding Light
Orion was founded in 1996 with a focus in agricultural lighting sales and compact fluorescent technology. Today, the company employs more than 250 employees in its Plymouth and Manitowoc, WI facilities, and recently completed a 70,000 square foot office and technology center adjacent to the Manitowoc plant.

Innovation
In 2001 Verfuerth designed and patented the Illuminator—one of the first high intensity fluorescent technologies on the market. This technology can double light levels while reducing lighting electricity by more than 50 percent when replacing the traditional high intensity discharge lighting.

President Barack Obama recently mentioned Orion in a speech about energy efficiency—see the video on their site: www.oriones.com [1].

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[1] http://www.oriones.com