

## Earning Its Recognition

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Energy savings sounds like a basic numbers game, but in TharpeRobbins' experience, it's all about perception.

### Its Own Rewards



The Attleboro, MA-based employee recognition and awards company—manufacturing corporate gifts and tokens of achievement—recently announced that it has achieved zero discharge status with the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

DEP inspections used to be viewed differently by TharpeRobbins, after decades of

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what seemed to amount to mutual distrust. “I think in the past, they looked at manufacturers as the bad bullies with their chemicals,” says Kevin Hustler, director of operations and facility management. On the flipside, “I think the DEP unfortunately has a bad stigma surrounding it. Some people think they are very close-minded and are not going to listen to you.”

Thus colored the relationship between many manufacturers and the organizations that governed them. That is until, for TharpeRobbins, they discovered that the DEP was more in their corner than they’d initially realized.

“The DEP is our friend and we enjoy working with them,” Hustler says. This evolution was partially due to the two parties becoming more aware of each other’s interests, but mostly, the change came from TharpeRobbins efforts to ask for what it wanted. Little did they know they’d get it.

### Three Baby Steps

TharpeRobbins has spent years utilizing a team of consultants and has seen great success with its internal initiatives to reduce wastes. It wasn’t until a representative from the DEP came in for a routine inspection and he enlightened TharpeRobbins on how close it was to attaining a new emissions rating. “Once they saw the records, they said, ‘Because of all the things you’ve been doing, you hardly emit anything,’” says Hustler.

TharpeRobbins got to this position through three specific initiatives. Firstly, the company’s spray screens were very large in size, with a somewhat inefficient use of space between them. When administering coatings, it took a lot more to cover each piece. In order to reduce its emissions, TharpeRobbins invested in smaller screens which they were able to lay closer together, thus reducing the amount of chemical applied. The second step, says Hustler, “Was basically our product mix. A lot of it took coatings before, but the trend has gone more towards precious metals.” Precious metals tend to tarnish less and need fewer coatings, meaning the company was able to reduce in that sense as well.

A third step TharpeRobbins took was to simply take a greener look at the products it was buying—whatever they could find that was lower in VOCs. “We still have the same performance and the same look; nothing was jeopardized,” says Hustler.

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So when the DEP came in and saw all these self-initiated changes, the organization recommended TharpeRobbins take the nominal remaining steps to apply to zero emissions status. “It went through with no problems whatsoever,” says Hustler, still a bit astounded by the project. “We really didn’t have any clue that we could file for that and have anybody consider us serious. Because we have the number of booths we have, plus some ancient history of us emitting that kind of volume, we never thought they’d even consider it. We were even allowed to keep all the booths.”

With zero discharge status, the company still must record its usage, but it doesn’t have to conduct as rigorous of a reporting process. Future interaction with the DEP can still include surprise inspections, but TharpeRobbins is confident in its facility. “It’s all bulletproof,” says Hustler. “And they’ll look at trends. If they see something is trending a certain way, they’ll make a recommendation.”

### Efficiency From All Sides

Once TharpeRobbins got a taste of opportunity, the company became hooked on finding more ways to improve—from emissions and recycling programs, to more efficient equipment purchasing.

Hustler cites an interesting partnership TharpeRobbins was able to develop with its energy provider, National Grid. “Part of your bill goes into a pool of money available for companies like us to convert over to something more efficient,” he says.

TharpeRobbins began working in tandem with National Grid, finding ways to save additional energy costs. The company wound up getting rid of its 50 HP compressors in favor of 25 HP variable speed screw compressors. Not only did National Grid match almost \$9,000 of the \$20,000 purchase, but TharpeRobbins has been able to save approximately \$11,000 in energy costs each year because of the new equipment.

### Step-By-Step Environmental:

In annual inspections by the DEP since 2005, TharpeRobbins has controlled up to 99 percent of all emissions including volatile

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organic compounds, hazardous air pollutants, and particulates. In addition, because of the minimal emissions, the new status enables TharpeRobbins to operate six paint spray booths for manufacturing emblems, jewelry and insignia.

The company has a number of additional environmentally-friendly practices already in place including:

**Water Recycling System** – In order to ensure a 98.3 percent reduction in water usage, TharpeRobbins created a state-of-the-art, closed-loop process that reduces annual water usage from 500,000 gallons a week to just 650 gallons a week.

**Toxic Use Reduction** – With a goal of reducing the chemical content in the company’s wastewater by 98 percent, the company’s closed loop process is designed to prevent chemicals from returning to the environment.

**Biodegradable Packaging** – To help save our landfills, most packing peanuts are soy- or corn-based and will dissolve. A majority of the trays used in packaging are made of biodegradable foam instead of traditional plastic.

**Recycling** – Recycling all paper in the TharpeRobbins’ facilities produces an average of 12 to 20 tons a year. According to the National Recycling Coalition, each ton (2,000 pounds) of this recycled paper can save 17 trees, 380 gallons of oil, three cubic yards of landfill space, 4,000 kilowatts of energy, and 7,000 gallons of water. Collection bins are placed in all facilities to recycle waste paper, cans and bottles. All new packing material is 100 percent recycled and all incoming packing materials are reused.

**Lighting** – Light bulbs in all facilities are non-mercury bearing and recyclable. The company has a “100% Lights Off Policy” throughout all facilities to conserve energy when rooms are not in use.

“As an industry leader, TharpeRobbins is committed to pursuing sound environmental practices,” says Joseph Viveiros, vice president of manufacturing. “With many of these initiatives already in place, we are constantly seeking new ways to further minimize our industrial footprint.”

“The pool of money is out there. Why not use it?” asks Hustler. “If we have to set aside a capital expense once a year in order to take advantage of this money, then we will.”

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### A Push In The Right Direction

So for a manufacturer not sure if and how to begin: "My advice would be, if you're hesitant to invest in new equipment, look at what you have for opportunities before you rule it out," says Hustler. "Look at your options because there are options out there that can offset the capital outlay of money. Because of deregulation, you no longer have to buy from one company. You're still billed from your power provider, but as far as where that pool of electricity is coming from...it's something you can decide on your own. We have a rate lock system now for 12 months so we can stay flat and budget right to that. These companies are extremely competitive with each other. We've averaged about \$30,000 in savings a year over the past couple of years by having a rate lock.

"It's a great deal if you can level out that spike. Call your electrical or heating contractor: we've gotten a lot of advice from these guys on whether there was anything more we could do, or if there was a more efficient machine, or a rebate program. Ask the question before you say you can't do it. Call the town, or the water department. They'll help you because they don't want you to go. It's a whole different game than it was 15 years ago. If you're courteous to them and treat them with respect, they'll help you."

Respect and assistance seem to be in everyone's best interest at this point in time, especially considering that its partnerships like these that keep American plants cost-conscious and competitive.

"They want to keep us here and keep folks employed," says Hustler. "A lot of people can learn from what we've been doing, and we can all be good neighbors. It's a nice trend."

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