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In the Spotlight

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Molded Rubber and Plastic Corp., Butler, WI

By Tony Deligio

Almost 90 years old, MRPC continues to evolve.

From its origins in 1921 as the Unbreakable Button Co. (manufacturing rubber buttons that survived the clothes wringer unscathed compared to glass counterparts), to its early '90s conversion from industrial to medical applications, the key to Molded Rubber and Plastic Corp.'s (MRPC) longevity is adaptability.

Today, that continuing evolution is evident in a $1.5 million investment, scheduled to finish at the end of January, that will add two new cleanrooms—Class 10,000 and 100,000—as well as new machinery. Greg Riemer, VP of sales and marketing for the company, says MRPC's multiple personas are a product of the economy at large. "The long and short of it is, we were an industrial product company until the early '90s," Riemer explains. "We're in the Midwest, and a lot of old-line industrial-type applications were going away."

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MRPC anticipated that shift nearly 20 years ago, and at a time when its business emphasized compression molding of rubber for industrial applications like seals, gaskets, and spark-plug boots, it pivoted its focus 180° towards the medical market, adding cleanrooms, as well as liquid silicone rubber (LSR) and thermoplastic injection molding.

"We turned over the existing customer base that we had," Riemer explains, "so through attrition of those industrial products that went away to lower-cost offshore manufacturing, we've replaced that business with medical or healthcare accounts and then grown it, subsequently, on top of that."

Riemer estimates that MRPC has doubled its annual revenues since that redirection to $15 million, with the goal to top $20 million in less than three years. Although the company no longer operates from its original 1921 site, it has occupied its present location since the late '50s, buying up additional land and buildings so that it now manages 85,000 ft2 of manufacturing space spread among three buildings.

The company's roughly 100 employees run three shifts, with 10 Toshiba injection molding machines, ranging from 20 to 250 tons, for thermoplastic molding, and five LSR machines from Battenfeld and Arburg, with clamping force from five to 60 tons. The company undertakes some micromolding, with certain parts that come in under 1g in weight. In addition to injection molding, MRPC offers extrusion of silicone tubing, custom shapes, and profiles, as well as secondary operations including cutting and printing. On the extrusion side, it makes tubing with diameters up to 1.5 inches, as well an multilumen tubing and over-jacketing of various core materials.

Among the equipment that MRPC has added is a laser, which is able to create openings, slots, and circles in plastics and rubber. The company has also used the laser to remove flash from cylindrical parts like metal and plastic rods. The area

has grown enough that MRPC now trains specialized laser engineers from within its staff.

Where materials meet

The mix of thermoplastic and thermoset has become a key differentiator for the company. "We've been a multimaterial company for many years, and how we go to the market is, we can provide our customers with a two-material solution," Riemer says. "Whether it's an elastomer molded onto a plastic product, or an elastomer molded on to a metal component; whether you need a silicone part, whether you need a TPE part, or whether you need some other custom rubber part, we provide this wide variety of material options." Riemer adds that offering options can save customers money in the long run, putting forward rubber or TPE when silicone is a costly over-engineered alternative. In other areas, performance requires a combination, with MRPC specializing in the overmolding of silicone onto thermoplastics. "That's one of the biggest niches in the market we go after," Riemer explains.

Riemer says MRPC isn't overly nostalgic for its commodity past. "Medical is a fast-paced, innovative market that isn't as cost driven as some of the traditional industrial markets," Riemer says. "It's a market that is more about how innovative can you be and what type of engineering-based solutions can you come up with."

Tony Deligio • tdeligio@modplas.com