

[wsbt.com/news/wsbt-elkhart-plastics-molds-future-20121126,0,5234979.story](http://www.wsbt.com/news/wsbt-elkhart-plastics-molds-future-20121126,0,5234979.story)

wsbt.com

Elkhart Plastics molds future

By JIM MEENAN

South Bend Tribune

7:50 PM EST, November 26, 2012

You could say Elkhart Plastics doesn't fit the mold of most locally owned companies.

advertisement

Then again, in today's world, maybe the rotomolding company does.

It's changed owners three times since 2006. And it eventually ended up back in the hands of local owners, many of whom were managers back in 2006.

In between it was owned by a company from Iceland that called it Promens hf, which sold it about two years ago to a company from the Netherlands that went with the name Indiana Rotomolding Inc. before selling it just four months later to a group that includes current president and CEO Jack Welter.

Welter, who came up on the financial side, has been with the company since 1990 and was part of the ownership group that sold it in 2006.

"It was never in the plan (to reacquire it) when I sold it in 2006," he said. "You can't plan that stuff. Just the opportunity presented itself.

"And the fact that some other key managers were willing to participate was the driving factor in that."

So when the company from the Netherlands wanted to shed its Indiana plastics companies, Welter was more than happy to head up a group to buy it.

"I've been doing it for 22 years now," he said. "It's a very diverse process. We make products for a variety of industries. We get to touch a lot of different companies with a lot of different products.

"We work with very small companies to very large. From my perspective, I enjoy that."

He also says he learned a lot while he ran the company for the international companies, but added, "It's more enjoyable to be back in this seat."

What will soon simply be known again as Elkhart Plastics includes a South Bend plant in Nimtz Parkway that employs 70 people, one in Elkhart that employs 50 and another in Middlebury that employs 250.

The company also has a plant in Littleton, Colo., (Littleton Plastics) and another in Ridgefield, Wash. (Portland Plastics). All told, the company has 500 employees in three states.

The company is a custom plastics processor. That means it makes molds for whatever somebody wants, Welter said.

That includes the yellow barrels people might see on the Toll Road, a product that dates back to the days when the company was called Spin-Cast Plastics in South Bend or plastic Dumpsters, tanks for RVs and agriculture and marine furniture for pontoon boats.

Their work is cost-effective, too.

"We can make very large, complex shapes that previously maybe had to be made with a variety of components being fastened or attached together, where we can make it in one piece so it can made more cost-effective," Welter said.

Being a custom molder, each location is geared toward customers in that area, Welter said. "Most of what we do is bulky, so shipping is somewhat restricted," he said.

How it works

The molding process begins with a polyethylene dry, fine powder for every product the company has, said Frank Ermeti, vice president of human resources.

"The powder is put into the mold, and the mold is moved into the oven. The arm turns on two axes, round and round across the axes."

"As the powder begins to melt into a liquid form, it starts to adhere to the outside of the mold through that slow rotating process," Ermeti said. At a certain temperature it coats the inside of the mold.

"A bigger part takes longer," he added.

The process includes a cooling-off period after it is taken out of the oven, and sometimes water is added to it to aid in the cooling.

Sometimes there are secondary trim operations that are part of the process, and occasionally another part might be added, Ermeti said.

Both say working out in the plant is physical labor that can get plenty hot in the summer time.

"It's what I call a hard labor job," Ermeti said. "We've got ovens. The doors open every 14 to 26 minutes to a cycle. When they open up, it's 500-degree air coming out at you.

"In December that feels pretty good. In July it doesn't feel so good."

Some like it hot and get used to it, and stay with the company for 15 to 20 years. Others don't and move on after short stints.

Expansion coming

Despite that kind of challenge, the company succeeds.

In fact, it's in the midst of a \$750,000 expansion at its location at 3300 N. Kenmore St., South Bend, which will create about 20 new jobs.

A lot of its success has to do with customer service, Welter said.

"We focus on customer service and being there and solving their problems," Welter said. "We've invested pretty heavily in engineering capabilities and quality capabilities so that we're able to serve very large Fortune 500-type companies.

"That makes us better."

It also allows them to better serve smaller companies, too, Welter said.

It helps that the company's inner core is solid, too.

In a way, Ermeti said, people on the inside of the plant are treated the same as people on the outside. The management team is responsive to workers and customers alike, he stressed.

"We are a very highly responsive group," Ermeti said. "When a customer has an issue, they can make a call and we get it answered immediately.

"We don't have a big hierarchy where it requires a lot of going up the ladder. Same thing with our employees; if they have a question, within a phone call, they can have an answer. That responsiveness is a big, big factor to our success."

Future solid

As the expansion would suggest, the future looks bright for Elkhart Plastics.

"With the bulk of our business, we don't see anything going down," Welter said. "I think in general most of our customers are trending upward.

"It's nothing to be overly excited about, but it's better than it has been."

If that sounds like the wise words of a former accountant, remember, they are.

"Personally, I understand a P and L (profit and loss) and what it takes to make money or what happens if you start going the other way," Welter said, adding he's learned the manufacturing business from the ground up. "So I am going to run this business, certainly understanding cash flow and costing and those types of things.

"If you don't have those basics, it's pretty tough to be successful, especially in manufacturing."

Staff writer Jim Meenan:
jmeenan@sbtinfo.com
574-235-6342

Copyright © 2012, South Bend Tribune