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Helping the world pack



Rick Leonhard, president (left); Robb Leonhard, vice president; RC Huhn, chief financial officer; and Scott Miller, operations manager stand in a display of some of their products at the Pack Expo in Las Vegas a few weeks ago.

Oostburg company designs, builds custom machinery for packaging industry

You'd be hard pressed to pick up a high-end bag of coffee or those all-the-rage individual drink packet mixes at the grocery store without encountering packaging that originated on a Viking Masek Global Packaging Technologies machine.

The Oostburg-based company designs and builds custom packaging machinery for a number of industries, but the food industry ranks number one with about 80 percent of the company's business. The packaging may ultimately contain coffee, cheese, cereals or snacks, holding anywhere from a few grams to as much as 50 pounds of something, like hops, for the microbrewery industry. The company also works closely with the nutraceutical industry and packages everything from liquids to pet foods, aquarium gravel to potting soil.

While there are other companies out there producing packaging machines, Viking Masek is oriented to delivering packaging solutions for its customers. That entails designing and setting up the machine in the customer's business, training staff on using it, servicing the machine and supplying parts as needed. The challenges they address are as diverse as the items ultimately packaged on their machines. The company has been tasked with everything from bagging the cultures used in yogurt in a minus 40-degree Fahrenheit environment to developing a machine that can package 190-degree soup, to speeding up cereal packaging from 75 bags to 130 bags per minute.

"Delivering customization is where we tend to specialize; we don't tend to do a lot of cookie cutter jobs," said Rick Leonhard, president of the company. "Companies come to us and say, 'We need to package this product and we need to do it fast.'"

Leonhard counts the staff's ability to recognize opportunities and deliver solutions in a timely manner in being a key differentiator for them. "That, and the fact that we can move quickly because we don't have a lot of bureaucratic layers to get through," he said. "We can take an idea or concept to a machine in about six months, which is a third of the time our competition takes to develop a solution."

That was part of what compelled Leonhard, who's been in the industry since the 1990s, to establish Viking in 2005. He struck upon an industry need. The company's first location accommodated it for five years before moving into a new facility in Oostburg in 2012.

In 2006, Leonhard and his three partners (brother Robb Leonhard, vice president; brother-in-law Scott Miller, operations manager; and RC Huhn, chief financial officer) formed a relationship with the Masek family in the Czech Republic and both entities began operating under the Viking Masek name in 2006.

"It's a really good relationship; they have their areas of strength and we have ours, and we can both concentrate on that," he said. For machines that are fairly typical or predictable,

Leonhard often brings them in from Europe. Masek's equipment was high quality but lacked distribution channels. Viking was strong in applications, programming and systems and was able to take machines and broaden the market for them. The specialty machines delivering custom solutions are the providence of the Viking Masek here in Oostburg — leading to the company's significant growth.

Just last month, Viking Masek broke ground on an 18,000-square-foot addition to its Oostburg location, bringing the total square footage of its headquarters to 52,000 square feet. Leonhard credits much of this to seizing investment opportunities in areas such as liquid packaging as well as surrounding themselves with great employees. "We've got great retention and so we don't have to repeatedly train people," Leonhard said. "I think the way we compensate has helped, too. We offer quarterly bonuses based on profitability, and we keep people very involved in the everyday running of the business."

Leonhard said that Viking Masek is a very progressive, yet fun place to work. He said it's a competitive environment that requires a volume of work and great productivity, but it isn't uptight and creative thinking is encouraged.

"It's a very uplifting environment, and it's paid off," said Leonhard. "Given our relatively small number of employees, we get a lot of equipment out the door."

It's paying off, as Viking Masek's sales

this year are up 50 percent from last year. In the last month, the company has added several new employees, always seeking individuals with high technical aptitude as that's crucial to the company's success. These employees are part of delivering the fast turnaround customers are demanding. "Customers now want machines in a very short lead time compared to what was acceptable 10 years ago," he said. They also want machines that are faster, more flexible and "don't require people with Ph.Ds to run the machine," he said.

Thanks to word of mouth and exposure at select trade shows, Viking Masek is now doing business internationally in places such as Uganda and the Philippines. "We're doing more and more international business, Leonhard said. "We didn't go after it initially because we wanted to develop our domestic market first, but it's a natural occurrence with our web presence."

Leonhard said the investment the company made in technology is materializing in 2015. "We had a good year in 2011, and then in 2012 and 2013, we spent a lot on new technologies," he said. "That affected the bottom line although sales were up. This year, both sales and the bottom line are up."

What's next? Not only international business but also acquisitions of businesses that complement what they company is already doing. "I expect we'll continue to add people in both sales and service, and that we'll probably expand the building yet again next year," Leonhard said.