

Extrudex renews vigor with team approach

New leader stresses worker involvement

By Bill Bregar
PLASTICS NEWS STAFF

PAINESVILLE, OHIO — Extrudex LLP, a small custom extruder in northeast Ohio, has a new attitude fostered by its new president, Jay Gardiner.

"This company has undergone a revitalization, a change in culture," he said.

Gardiner is well-known in the plastics industry. He was president of the Society of Plastics Engineers for the 1996-97 term. A

gregarious Long Islander, Gardiner came on as a consultant to Extrudex in December, and then became president in February.

Gardiner and top managers who are Extrudex veterans said they have worked to give the 60 employees more authority to make decisions. They explained the changes June 5 at the company's Painesville factory. That same day, the firm handed employees their first production bonus in years.

"We function as a team much better recently than we ever did in the past," said Wendy White, human resources manager and a 22-year Extrudex veteran.

The owner of Extrudex, who does not

want to be identified, brought Gardiner in to get the extrusion house growing again. Extrudex had some good technology — such as two-color extrusion and dual-durometer extrusion combining flexible and rigid sections — and solid customers in lawn care, retail point-of-purchase and aerospace.

Gardiner avoids phrases like "employee empowerment," but said the key so far has been simple things like good communication, mutual respect and basic planning. "I just gave them a jump-start," he said.

"The people here always had the ability, they just needed to be given the freedom to work," he said. "And I think that is the

whole nine yards — give them the freedom to go ahead and do it, and a little bit of culture and climate change. It's the engine that could."

Gardiner credits three senior managers: Craig Mills, plant manager; controller Scott Brown; and White, who in addition to her human resources duties, works closely with suppliers and customers.

White notes a "whole different mentality" at Extrudex, where she has worked 22 years. "The overall atmosphere here has improved," she said. "Relaxed" probably is not a good word, but we can communicate without feeling threatened by one another.

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Mills worked at Extrudex for 10 years before leaving last year for a job at another local plastics company. When Gardiner first arrived, managers told him they wanted Mills back. Now the company is busier and has reduced manufacturing costs.

The management team holds a production meeting once a week. They make decisions collectively.

Extrudex generated \$4 million in sales last year. The company runs 23 extrusion lines, including four recently relocated from a small plant in Ravenna, Ohio.

Gardiner still runs Gardiner Plastics Inc., his small resin brokerage in Port Jefferson, N.Y. He spends three days a week in Painesville.

During a tour of the 90,000-square-foot plant, Gardiner and Tod Oliva, business development director, said Extrudex focuses on short runs and complex parts, such as channels for point-of-purchase displays. Retailers and consumer product manufacturers demand quick turnaround and customized work.

"Our niche is highly engineered extruded products and relatively short runs, like POP profiles," Oliva said. "We're never going to be a company that's going to compete on hundreds

of thousands of parts per year, churning out low-margin business. That's not where we want to be."

The POP display channels can be large and complicated. At the plant June 5, one line was extruding a part that looks like a vinyl window frame, made of rigid PVC in clear and white, combined with sections of clear flexible PVC. Two separate parts have to slide together.

Other examples of dual-durometer extrusions include a squeegee for bathroom tiles and

a safety-guard flap that protects feet from lawn mowers.

Another signature lawn mower part is the thick black roller on commercial mowers. After the heavy parts are extruded, employees machine them and do other finishing operations. Extrudex also supplies the sticks that hold the warning signs used by lawn-care companies.

Extrudex also produces self-adhesive butyl tape for home im-

provement projects on a dedicated production line.

Some of the parts get pretty exotic. Gardiner said Extrudex made an extruded component for the Hubble space telescope.

Employees take pride that one product is protecting U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Frames that hold thick polycarbonate windows are extruded, cut and fabricated in Painesville.

Plant manager Mills explained how secondary operations are being moved to their own dedicated area, away from the extrusion lines. That move will free up space so the company can extend its cooling tanks and run the lines much faster, he said.

Managers studied how to improve the flow and made a decision.

"You can always count on the leadership of this company," Gardiner said. "These people know what they're going to do and they're solving problems."

