



Making the Most of a Unique Situation

Commercial barbecues are great for company events, fundraisers and charity projects.

Local manufacturers use innovation, high standards and customization to beat the competition

BY DEVON BABIN

There are many who see Calgary as a one-trick pony. If it were not for the oil and gas industry, businesses in the city simply wouldn't survive. This is an accurate assessment of many local businesses, but Calgary's manufacturers are bucking the trend and branching out to a vast assortment of other industries and sectors.

Pulp Packaging is an example of a company that saw an opportunity and built on it. Starting out as a machine shop, clients began asking Robin Tremblay and his staff to create moulds that would be used to make custom packaging. After a few years of development, Tremblay and his team developed a superior type of pulp-moulded packaging that is made up of recycled paper and similar products. What truly set them apart from the competition, however, was their ability to significantly bring down the costs of moulds. While some moulds sold for between \$10,000 to \$20,000, Pulp Packaging was able to cut the cost to well under \$1,000. This allowed companies to put less capital into a mould allowing Tremblay to be able to deliver smaller quantities to his clients at an affordable price.

"The mould side is really the critical side," says Tremblay.

This is important to his customers not only because there is less immediate cost involved, but also for storing purposes.

While Pulp Packaging takes up considerably less space than many foam options, significant amounts can take up space like any other product. Having smaller batches delivered periodically versus massive orders that will sit for months wasting space is a trend for a lot of companies.

Pulp Packaging prides itself on delivering the best quality and the service of truly customizing each mould for the client. Expertise is needed to ensure the packaging is strong and the staff at Pulp Packaging has that in spades.

"It's not a science, it is an art," says Tremblay.

Pulp Packaging products, on top of being customized and rugged, can be significantly cheaper than some alternatives, such as foam.

Pulp Packaging also takes the environment to heart, with their products being made of all recycled materials. They are also LEED certified, which means the products can be used on even the most environmentally conscious projects across the country. The company has seen an impressive amount of growth over the past couple of years and are currently doubling the size of their plant.

Nortruck is another example of a Calgary-based manufacturer that uses versatility, customization and quality to set themselves apart from their competitors. Started in 1983,



Above: An example of a mobile office, just one of the many custom products Nortruck produces.

Right: A custom creation shows the companies versatility.



the company specializes in aluminium fabrication often focusing on canopies, tool sheds and service bodies for trucks, vans and other vehicles. But they don't stop there. Nortruck is a custom fabricator that isn't scared of a challenge and has branched out into large, commercial barbecues and specialty projects like custom shipping containers.

"We basically say we are custom manufacturers," says Phil Doublet, vice-president of Nortruck. "We get the hard, weird stuff that other people won't do."

Doublet and his business partner, Rick Hoinkes, bought Nortruck in 2005 and since then have grown the company by a third of its former size.

Nortruck's success is in large part due to their employees and growth strategy.

"The company has a history of not doing any layoffs," he says. "We believe in growing and nurturing people and they stay a long time. Slow, steady growth is exactly the right model for that."

It isn't hard to find an employee at Nortruck that has been with the company 10, 15 and even 20 years. The quality, experienced staff help make it possible for the company to perform custom work that can't be found anywhere else. Companies ranging from large telecom operations such as Telus to organizations like the RCMP and even smaller tradespeople are all looking for quality, customized products that will stand the test of time and the wear of their occupation.

The company does exist in a fairly competitive market, but they don't try to be anything they're not. Most of Nortruck's competitors are larger operations that work off higher volume but are unable to do the custom work of Nortruck.

Another key to Nortruck's success is their versatility and ability to spot opportunities. Since the '90s the company has also been manufacturing commercial barbecues to different companies, associations, charities and other groups.

"We position that as a marketing and branding machine," says Doublet of the large barbecues they manufacture. Some customers of Nortruck own upwards of five barbecues and use them as an effective promotional tool throughout the summer months.

"From a marketing and branding standpoint, it's not something people always think about, but the guys that get it go, 'Whoa,'" says Doublet.

Doublet enjoys the success the company has had, and they have plans to grow as long as it fits within their plan.

"The big strategic goal is to keep growing sustainably, reasonably and in a straight line," says Doublet.

Currently Doublet says they are actively looking for dealers to carry their products, but they are not in a rush. Doublet wants to ensure any dealer has the same commitment to service and quality as everyone else who works at Nortruck. Doublet says he is also looking to expand Nortruck's presence in the U.S.

Fiberbuilt, headquartered in northeast Calgary, is the perfect example of how manufacturers can adapt to an ever-changing market. What started out as a company that made straightforward, standard line brooms and brushes in the late '50s has grown into a company with a wide range of products for a number of industries.

After purchasing the company in 1978, Jack Hooper brought it through the recession of the early '80s by branching into industries such as oil rigs and construction.

"What he did was develop new brushes for various other trades and applications," says Michael Hooper, who took the company over from his father in 1997 along with partner Dolores Houghton. Continuing that mentality of adapting and branching out, Jack Hooper had a brainstorm one day after taking golf lessons and noticing the person beside him had broken a club and hurt their hands while practicing.

"In the late '80s and early '90s he came up with the idea to turn a brush upside down and hit some golf balls off of it," says Michael Hooper.

The end result, after numerous attempts and versions, was the practice golf mat, now well known worldwide. At the

time, there was nothing on the market that came close to its quality and design.

“Fiberbuilt created the number one golf mat in the world,” he says.

Now available in over 40 countries around the globe, Fiberbuilt has solidified its name in the golf world.

But they didn’t stop there. Since then, the company has gone to great lengths to continue engineering brushes of different sorts for a long list of industries and companies.

“We made a very concerted effort to develop the industrial market,” says Hooper.

Brushes, although not always recognized by the public, are used in everything from cleaning streets and brushing teeth to washing vegetables and brushing fabrics.

“It’s virtuously endless where brushes go,” says Hooper.

And, although there are plenty of manufacturers doing well in Calgary, the city does have its negatives, as well as its positives. The fact is Calgary has an abundance of skilled labourers, but it is also a reality that the labour is expensive in comparison to other countries and even other cities.

“Like anything else, it’s a trade-off. Calgary has high labour costs relatively speaking,” says Doublet. He points out that labour would cost much less in Mexico or even in the U.S.

Hooper agrees, saying that labour costs are just one of the hurdles Calgary manufacturers must negotiate. Calgary, along with a large pool of skilled labour, also has geographic upsides being a good location for those looking to access the entire West. Some argue, however, that the city itself isn’t necessarily business friendly with property taxes and land values adding costs to any business.

“It is a very challenging environment to operate manufacturing in,” says Hooper. “Simply the cost.”

Manufacturing in Calgary is alive and well, but it certainly isn’t without its challenges. To stay successful companies must adapt quickly to market changes, offer customization or other benefits competitors can’t, and make the best quality products possible in order to compete with less expensive and less durable products coming from overseas. **BIC**



The company has managed to make a name for itself and its golf products in countries all over the world.



Fiberbuilt’s golf mats have been engineered to respond like real grass.



Fiberbuilt’s impressive headquarters in North East Calgary.