

processor strategies

Plastican

Can't Succeed at Molding 'Commodities'? Best to 'Can' That Way of Thinking

So you think a can is a can is a can? Then you probably never heard of Plastican. Since its founding in 1970 by the Clementi family in Leominster, Mass., Plastican has established a leading position in open-head pails with a line of products that demonstrate more innovation than one might expect in a so-called commodity processing operation.

Leominster is the largest of four Plastican plants, and is believed to be the biggest open-head (injection molded) pail-production facility in the U.S. It houses 27 presses from 700 to 2700 tons. Plastican runs two- and four-cavity molds that are designed and maintained in-house. The privately held company started in business making 4-gal. food containers, but now furnishes a wide range of industrial containers to package paint, food, construction and janitorial supplies, and lots more. It molds lids as well.

In a business where price usually rules, Plastican has focused on a manufacturing and selling strategy in which product development is an interactive process between the molder and its customers. The end result is a pail engineered to give the customer an edge in the market.

"When is a pail not a pail? When it's a solution," says James Coletta, Plastican's v.p. of sales and marketing. "Our process starts with a conversation with the customer. They are interested in top-line growth, especially after a recession. How can we help them?" he asks rhetorically. "Can we make them a product that's easier to open and close, that's more attractive, that fits better on the shelf, that saves them on shipping? It's a consultative approach."

Then technology steps in. Plastican makes proprietary modifications to its presses—notably in screw design—and considers its ability to mix, match, and blend various grades of HDPE and PP to be a particular advantage over its competitors, which include four or five national companies and a handful of one-plant operations that mostly compete locally. "Resin selection is a key part of what we offer," notes Mark Keyes, director of technical services. "Our presses can blend materials with extremely different melt characteristics to tailor container performance to what the customer requires, whether it's compression strength, environmental stress crack resistance, or post-consum-




Resin tailoring through blending is critical to Plastican's success. Top: Bruce Godin, resin manager, checks results of a specimen test. Bottom: Anthony Dickson, director of quality, inspects a twist-and-lock container after a startup.



er reclaim content." In 2008, the molder opened an R&D center in Leominster to help in this effort.

In the last 15 months, Plastican brought out eight new products, including a rectangular 4.25-gal. container of either HDPE or PP. Its excellent stacking strength permits 20% larger cube capacity than a like-sized round pail to cut shipping costs. Compared to typical square pails of the same size, this container also uses 10% less material. In response to increased customer demand, Plastican also added significant production capacity for its patented twist-and-lock containers. These pails open with a push of a tab and twist of the cover; twisting the lid locks it back in place.

"We're doing much better than the industry overall," says Coletta. "And part of the reason is that we continue to innovate. Innovation is especially critical in difficult times, because it helps us generate enthusiasm and excitement that will ultimately lead to new business." 

By James Callari, Editorial Director