

Tailored Label Products



*A Wisconsin converter
welcomes the most difficult challenges.*

By Jack Kenny

Awalk through the production area of Tailored Label Products on a typical day might reveal three entirely different types of work being run on three different presses: here a solvent job; there a printing, sheeting and packaging operation; there a nameplate on a firm substrate. The people at Tailored Label Products get their kicks out of accomplishing the seemingly impossible. Their marketing claim goes like this: “Our labels go where other labels can’t.”

Tailored Label Products Inc. sits on a rise in an industrial complex in Menomonee Falls, WI, a suburb of Milwaukee. Much of its output is for industrial use, and the more challenging the better.

“Think of who’s in town,” says Mike Erwin, president. “Equipment manufacturers of all types: Rockwell, Harley-Davidson, Briggs, outdoor power equipment manufacturers, high volume businesses. Also, companies that make medical equipment, electronics, small device manufacturers. Those are our customers.”

Above: Inside and outside the Tailored Label Products’ plant in Menomonee Falls, WI.

“We feed into other tiers,” says Kevin Machan, the company’s business development manager. “We get into multiple levels of supply.”

Now 20 years old, Tailored Label Products occupies 26,000 square feet of a 60,000-foot purpose-built structure owned by one of the principals, Todd Bence. “The building was designed so that we can grow in increments,” Erwin says.

Intuition and technical know-how

Tailored Label Products (TLP) was founded by Marvin Weiss and Todd Bence. Weiss ran the day to day operations until his retirement recently. Bence was active in the company during its first decade, but today is involved in other business interests. Mike Erwin has a background in industrial production, and was recruited to run the company just over a year ago. He is a co-owner today with Bence.

“This business reflect’s Marv’s personality,” says Machan, who has been with the company for 11 years. “He is inquisitive, and technically apt, and that’s how we are today. We like having someone come to us and say, ‘We tried three other converters and they can’t get it done’. And then we do it.”

“Over the years,” Machan adds, “we have earned a reputation as troubleshooters and problem solvers. We have had a consultative selling model for years, but with a holistic approach. When a customer comes to us with a challenge, we say, ‘Help us understand the use, the process, how the consumers use your product.’”

TLP’s pursuit of technical excellence goes beyond the manufacturing process. The company employs three full-time technical sales people with experience ranging from 13 to 20 years each. “They spend their lives with the clients,” Erwin says, “going through every iteration to find the right solution.”

Finding those solutions takes time, and TLP’s practice is not to accept a quick-fix. “Our average sales cycle can be eight to nine months,” Erwin observes, “from the initial sale to production. We might produce the first edition of a product right away, then the second edition, and finally the version that satisfies everyone. We build from each of these.

“One example: We worked on a security product for three years, tweaking the adhesive for the proper release off of a plastic card, leaving no residue.”

“That’s not uncommon for us,” adds Kevin Machan. “Most label printers around here are involved in packaging. A lot of our work is part of manufacturing — not a lot of brand promotion.”

“We’re not just printing labels,” Erwin states. “We are converting materials.”

Lean thought, Lean action

Mike Erwin has studied and worked with the principles of Lean Manufacturing (and will speak on the topic at the TLMI Annual Meeting in October). In his year at the helm of Tailored Label Products he has worked with the team to institute changes in manufacturing that are having an effect on how the company’s customers do business and make money. TLP plans to add a manufacturing quality engineer to the staff to imple-



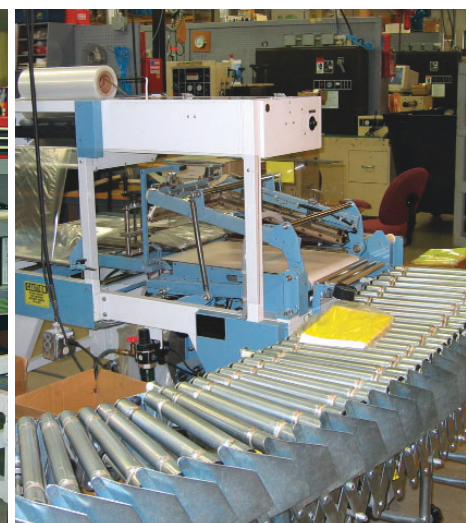
From left: Kevin Machan, chief press operator Steve Melzer, and Mike Erwin.

ment pre-production process planning. The company also works with the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Program to facilitate Lean Manufacturing concepts.

One visible outgrowth of Lean thinking is the creation of a product fulfillment program for a big customer. The sheeted products have extremely high turnover and hundreds of SKUs, and the customer was shipping constantly to its group of distribution centers around the country. So TLP approached the client with an unusual proposal: Put the fulfillment center in the converting plant and skip an entire warehousing step.

The products are printed, diecut and sheeted, fed into a shrink wrap station at the end of the press, and rolled from there into boxes. In one small corner of the plant is a storage area with a computer linked directly to the client’s logistics program. One employee fulfills the orders to the distribution center.

The result, says Erwin, is that the customer was able to reduce labor and other costs significantly. TLP, through analysis of the process, the addition of the packaging line, reduction



Fulfilling work: Lean Manufacturing principles helped TLP create a product fulfillment operation for a client. At left, press operator Dan Melichar gathers the sheeted labels from the end of the

press, feeds them into the packaging unit (center), from where they emerge and travel down rollers into a box ready for movement to the in-plant warehouse area and same-day shipment.



Inspection and rewind on the Rotoflex

of labor and the dedication of a press to the project finds itself saving between \$50,000 and \$60,000 a year, even with the new equipment.

“We cleaned up their supply chain,” Erwin says. “We probably did it for half of what it would have cost them, in one-third the space. Because of that, it helps them focus on what they do better.”

“We are drilling into companies — the big ones — to see what more we can do for them. What we are saying to our customers is this: Let us figure it out. Let us shrink it, compress it, optimize it. We know how we can do these things.”

Execution

Tailored Label Products is enjoying growth and a higher visibility among manufacturers who have label challenges. The company continues to explore ways to implement Lean Manufacturing principles. Customer service and production people meet every morning for seven minutes to “go over everything.” Top managers meet frequently to plan and execute strategies, “to work the plan.”

“We’re big fans of execution,” says Mike Erwin. “We don’t just talk about it.” ●



Brian Wood runs a Mark Andy.



Tailored Label Products Inc.

W165 N5731 Ridgewood Drive
Menomonee Falls, WI 53051
262-703-5000
www.tailoredlabel.com

This article was published in the September 2004 issue of

