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Bob Trebilcock

### Materials handling: Colson Caster keeps the wheels turning

August 25, 2009

Not much lasts these days. Your friends move. Your favorite restaurant closes up shop. Your favorite show gets cancelled. And companies go bust.

Casters, on the other hand, endure. That's right. I'm talking about those wheels on the bottoms of everything from the portable files underneath my desk to the toolbox in the garage to the hand trucks, dollies, and portable conveyors in the warehouse. If it moves, it probably has a caster or wheel, says Don Laux, who is president and general manager of **Colson Caster**. With headquarters in Jonesboro, Ark., Colson makes 35,000 different kinds of casters, wheels and rubber bumpers. What's more, the company is about to celebrate it's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, including 50 years in Jonesboro.

"We are a non-powered material handling product in an increasingly automated world," says Laux. "But when you think about products that last, you have to think of wheels and casters. Otherwise, how are people going to move things around? This is a product that's not going away."

And, while there are few products more mature than the wheel – let's face it, we've been working on improvements since the Stone Age – innovation continues. "We have a design center that allows us to create and test a wheel for a customer looking for a wheel or caster with certain properties," says Laux. "We are producing product in the U.S., but also in China, Brazil and Mexico. And, we continue to look at new ways to lower the cost to produce a caster, through new composite materials and better engineering."

And, to lower its operating costs in this economic environment, Colson Caster launched a self-described low-tech green initiative that has rallied the troops and cut energy costs.

The process, as described by Tom Lackey, the plant engineer in Jonesboro, began with the purchase of a new, more energy efficient compressor for the plant. "The old compressor was ancient and the new ones had a lot of features that allowed us to control our energy costs," says Lackey. "About that same time, we brought the city in to look at our power demands and help us find ways to make further energy reductions."

Colson calculated they would see a quick three-year return on their investment from a combination of energy savings (up to 25% over the old compressor), a \$2,000 per year savings in repair costs due to the design of the new unit, and savings on service and repair costs. On top, there were softer benefits, like a safer work environment due to an enclosed design and lower decibel levels.

At a time when other businesses in the area were laying off, cutting costs to save jobs became an imperative. The plant put together a team to "look at nickel and dime issues," Lackey says. Forget putting solar panels on the roof or computerized thermostats. Instead, they looked at how much power it took to run a standard 8-foot fluorescent light or a cooling fan and how much could be saved by running them less. They looked at where they could reduce lighting in storage areas, or turn off hallway lights. By replacing spotlights with fluorescent lights, they realized a 66% reduction in wattage usage. There was more money to be saved if they waited to turn on the compressors until closer to the start of the production line and then turned them off earlier in the afternoon.

Maybe most important of all, they translated those energy costs into sales– how many casters did they have to sell to run a light. "By instilling that thought process in people on the line, we involved them in the sales process," says Lackey. "They understood that the less energy we used, the fewer sales it took to be profitable."

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The result of all these efforts, says Laux, the company president, is that the Jonesboro plant is better positioned to ride out the economic storm, take advantage of any upturn, and start working on the next 125 years. After all, in the year 2134, we'll probably still need wheels and caster.

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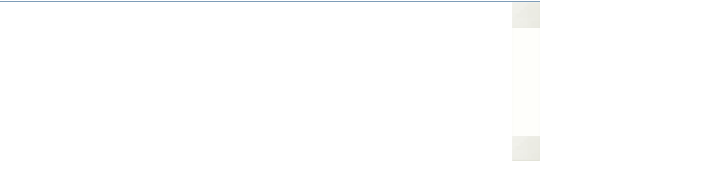
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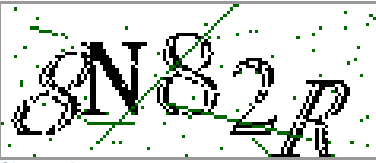
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