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ENTERPRISE

From the November 5, 2004 print edition

As plastics go, exports grow

Willow Ridge's degradable additives find world market

Karen Bells

Courier Senior Editor

Willow Ridge Plastics aims for longevity in customer relationships, brevity in customer products.

The Erlanger-based company manufactures additives that make plastic products disintegrate. Its patented Masterbatch additives are sold in pellet form to companies



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"Plastic lasts 300 to 400 years before it degrades on its own," said President William Hogan, who has worked in the plastic compounding field for 30 years. "We accelerate that process to about a year."

Most of the demand for Willow Ridge's nine products comes from overseas, especially in South America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, said Hogan.

Production of plastic bags and other items, as well as the demand for those things, shifts and moves around the world, said Willow Ridge sole owner and Chairwoman Elizabeth Tu, who started the company in 1993. It's critical that she and Hogan stay current on hot manufacturing sites and where they're exporting -- considerations often driven by governmental or consumer demand.

"You have to consider where the plastic is being made and where it's being exported and what the policies and standards are in those countries," said Tu, who is used to staying abreast of world markets as owner of Cincinnati-based E.Tu Associates Inc., a Far East trade consulting and broker business.

Their efforts have been paying off. Hogan said 2004 sales will be 40 percent higher than in 2003, though he wouldn't specify exact sales numbers. And the U.S. Department of Commerce gave its Export Achievement Award to the company during a ceremony in September.

around the world that create a variety of plastic items -- particularly plastic bags for consumer uses -- and want to have those items degrade after disposal.

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While Willow Ridge has successfully exported to many countries over the years, the award recognized its recent efforts to develop new markets, said Dao Le, director of the Commerce Department's U.S. Export Assistance Center in Cincinnati.

"They were able to successfully penetrate a new market, India, as well as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates," said Le. "They can be challenging markets. The legal and regulatory framework is somewhat opaque."

Willow Ridge took advantage of the expertise offered through the assistance center's network of eight offices in India, Le said, and received advice on everything from taxes and tariffs to legal and regulatory issues.

Nonetheless, he said, exporting can be a very manageable and important business strategy -- and one that sometimes intimidates small businesses.

"There is this misperception about exporting -- we think that it's only for larger businesses or it's quite difficult," he said. "It isn't. And we have a lot of support networks that can hold one's hand."

Tu and Hogan also have grown their business by building a network of distributors around the world, traveling extensively to nurture relationships and developing leads through their Web site, which is written in English and Chinese.

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The specific assistance that Willow Ridge gained from the export assistance center included access to customized market research; participation in catalog shows, where the center displays the firm's product literature at trade shows in foreign countries and collects information about prospective leads; and being highlighted in Commercial News USA, a marketing catalog with about 400,000 readers in 145 countries.

to \$600.

The export office isn't the only source the eight-person Willow Ridge uses to boost its capabilities. The company also contracts for research help from the University of Akron and the University of Iowa, which have significant knowledge about plastics and corn starch, a primary ingredient in many of the additives, Hogan said.

This is key, Tu said, because every project is different and the specific makeup and usage requirements of the additives are application-driven: Willow Ridge has to work with the client to determine how a product should be packaged, transported and stored; what specific strength and other properties the item must have; whether it should degrade

Many of the Export Assistance Office's services are free to small businesses, Le said, and others are priced for cost recovery. Participation in a catalog show, for example, costs \$300

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biologically, oxidatively or through photodegradation; and how long the plastic needs to remain stable before it disintegrates.

"A lot of people think (a plastic item) starts degrading when it's disposed -- as if it knows it's been disposed," Tu said. "It begins to degrade when it's made, but it's a controlled degradation. There's a lot of client education for the additives as well as end product."

The testing phase to get the additive formulation right can take up to six months and costs the client nothing, she said.

While most of Willow Ridge's clients are overseas, Dale Bardes has been using the company for years right down the road in Rabbit Hash. As owner and president of inventing company Intelligent Products Inc., he uses the technology for his Mutt Mitt product. The plastic mitt is used to pick up dog feces, and metal dispensers filled with the mitts can be found in 10,000 municipalities around the country, he said. Hamilton County uses the Mutt Mitt in many of its parks.

"Our product responds to all three types of degradation -- bio, oxidative and photo," he said. "You have no idea how it's going to be used and disposed of, so I wanted it to respond to all three."

Willow Ridge supplies additives for the production of 160,000 Mutt Mitts per day.

"They're very responsible. You don't have to do a lot of hand-holding or checkup, which is becoming harder to find these days," he said.

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