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Brian Smith (center), vice president and general manager at Hi-Tech Plastics in Kaukauna, stands in front of a machine making stretch film with employees (from left) Brian Jens, Brenda Mueller, Clint Cooper, and Mary Paris. The Business News photo by Amanda Lauer

Specialty stretch film is company's focus

Hi-Tech Plastics is happy to produce wrap for clients wanting something unusual

By Amanda Lauer

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Anybody who is making something and is shipping something needs the products Hi-Tech Plastics in Kaukauna produces.

The company specializes in specialty stretch films, otherwise known as pallet wrap. Vice President and General Manager Brian Smith has spent his entire career in the packaging business and has been with Hi-Tech Plastics for 12 years.

"This business started in 1986," he said. "Bernie Dahlin bought it in November of 1999. If you're in this business, everybody makes some 20-inch 80 gauge, which is standard product, and somebody would make some 18-inch 80 gauge in clear films. We also do that, but what we really try to focus on is a specialty type of business. We do colors here. Some are opaque so you can't see through it. It's more expensive, but the reason people use color is to conceal products or for inventory identification or some even like it because it matches their company colors."

The raw material for specialty stretch films is resin (linear low density polyethylene or LLDPE). It is shipped to Hi-Tech via rail cars from Canada and the Southern U.S., states such as Texas or Louisiana. Their products are

used in countless markets. "Packaging distributors are buying and reselling our product. So, in some cases we know where the products are being used and in others we don't," Smith said.

"We have a really big range of products, we're doing gauges anywhere from 50 to 200 (mm)," he said. "We run hand film, we make machine film, we make 2-inch extended core. We make 3-inch and 5-inch banding rolls. We also make large rolls. Some people want something unusual for a real specific application — a 40-inch, 50-inch, 60-inch, 70-inch, or an 80-inch. We would make that here, too."

Many of their competitors are limited in what they can produce. "We get referrals regularly," he said. "Being a smaller company other companies look at us and say, 'We don't make color films, but we know these guys do and they'll be able to handle it.' If customers have something real specific for a specific application we love that because we love niche business here."

Smith said Hi-Tech also does odd quantities. "A lot of people in our business will do a minimum of five or 10 pallets, we'll do one pallet minimums. Our turn around will be much, much quicker. In the color business, our competitors do an average of six to eight weeks. We'll do ours on average in around two or less. With the colors we also do UVI which is a product that helps the film from breaking down out in the elements."

The primary focus for Hi-Tech Plastic is their customers and assuring the delivery of quality products to them. "Because of the unusual things and the quantities we're willing

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to do and the fast turnaround, Hi-Tech Plastics can sell all over the United States," Smith said. "We ship into California, into Florida, we ship out east to Massachusetts, we do a lot in the Midwest, we've been fortunate we've shipped product into Hawaii, Jamaica, and we've got some product that we ship into Puerto Rico now. We also ship into Canada and Mexico."

There are 21 people currently employed at Hi-Tech Plastics. Through the years that number has fluctuated, Smith said. "We've had some reduction and some growth, in 2007 and 2008 business got a little bit tight but it made us tighten our straps around here," he said. "It was really a good thing for us because ultimately it made us really streamlined. Coming out of that allowed us to be a much more healthy company."

Today, the business is running 24/7 and they are in the process of hiring more team members. "We're continuing to grow, the key

is retaining employees and training," Smith said. "Having good attitudes is really critical. Most employees work 12-hour shifts, 7 to 7. They work three days one week and four days the next. Once they get a schedule at the beginning of the year, they know what they're working the whole year. We typically have overtime here. Because we are lean, if somebody's on vacation we need someone to fill that shift."

The acronym TEAM, Together Everyone Achieves More, is woven into the culture at Hi-Tech Plastics. "We really try to encourage that here, we need everybody to assist. Everybody is a quality manager here. It's a small outfit, and we all wear a lot of hats around here, that's for sure."

He said that mindset makes Hi-Tech a great place to work. "I really love coming to work because it's fun meeting with people, working with different products. We have a really, really good group of people that work here. I'm excited because we've got great attitudes, the people here are very dependable. They like coming to work. They bring up issues and help us solve problems. That's one of the key things we're trying to do is to make sure that everyone's participating."

Smith is optimistic about the future for Hi-Tech Plastics. "We're excited, we really think there's going to be an uptick in business and we've started to see that," he said. "Part of that is making sure we continue to call on people that we aren't selling to right now, getting our name out there. We've had more success recently, we've changed some things on our website, which is how people find us."

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