

ROCHESTER

Democrat and Chronicle

October 17, 2007

OrCon Industries turn recyclables into packaging

Patrick Flanigan
Staff writer

Bruce Olson and his team of workers at OrCon Industries Corp. make a product that's so ubiquitous it's practically invisible — packaging materials.

"Just about everything comes in a package," said Olson, president of the LeRoy company.

But if the OrCon team of designers and manufacturers do their job correctly, the person who opens their packages won't even know they exist.

And one sure way to fail at the goal is to create a package that generates a lot of trash.

"The two times you notice a package are when the item inside is broken or when you see it blowing down the street," said Don Appleton, an adjunct professor of packaging science at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

That's one reason OrCon is benefiting from an industrywide push to design packages with "sustainable" materials that can be pulled from the waste stream and kept out of landfills.

These include clear plastic lids made from soda bottles; molded shock absorbers made from the pulp of old newspapers and shipping pallets made from corrugated boxes.

In short, by using recyclables, OrCon is creating the demand for the materials that go in the blue recycling bin instead of the garbage can.

"If a piece of paper gets in the landfill, it's lost forever," he said. "It can't be recycled or reused. At the end of the day, it's the consumer that really drives a lot of this."

OrCon and its subsidiaries have about 80 employees in the Rochester area and another 80 in Cattaraugus County and Tennessee. Olson declined to reveal the company's revenue figures.

Founded in 1984, OrCon is a specialty company that bills itself as a developer of packaging solutions for its customers. In other words, engineers design custom packages for oddly shaped and sized goods that are produced at lower volumes.

So while molded-pulp products like egg cartons or fast-food drink trays are produced on machines that make nothing else, OrCon's machines can be fitted with different molds for different products.

Olson invested in this technology about seven years ago to expand the company's market as the Rochester area's manufacturing sector continues to shrink.

"If they don't make it here they don't package it here," he said.

But it turned out to be a fortuitous move.

In February, Wal-Mart Stores Inc. launched its "Packaging Scorecard," which evaluates the sustainability of packages delivered to the world's largest retailer.

"They're putting pressure on their suppliers to package an environmentally friendly product," Olson said.

Appleton, who often takes his students to tour the OrCon plant, said sustainability has been an important issue in the packaging industry for decades. But recent trends, including the Wal-Mart scorecard, are pushing it to new levels.

That bodes well for OrCon, which is already positioned to capitalize on the demand, he said.

"They've always looked at new ways to be innovative," he said.