



From Design to Delivery at Custom Rubber Corp.

By Dianna Brodine, managing editor, Inside Rubber

Most companies tout their commitment to customer service. Most companies say safety is the top priority.

Most companies endorse their employees as the most valuable business asset.

Few companies act like it. At Custom Rubber Corp., President Charlie Braun “beats the drum” to ensure more than lip service is paid to the characteristics that set his company above many of its competitors.

Photo above: Custom Rubber Corp. operates by a set of clear priorities: 1. Safety, 2. Quality and 3. Production.

Service – from design to delivery

Custom Rubber Corp. was founded in 1946 in Cleveland, Ohio. Thirty-four years later, the Braun family purchased the business, which at the time ran 10 steam compression presses and molded plumbing products. The business was moved to its current location in 1986 and expanded in 1992 to a total of 66,000 square feet.

Today, Custom Rubber Corp.’s 103 employees mold products for the consumer goods, automotive, material handling and oil and gas markets. Many of its components – particularly those for the automotive industry, require metal-to-rubber bonding, secondary assembly or prototype work, most of which is provided in house.

The manufacturing company has seen significant growth in the past year, which led to shift changes, an influx of employees and new equipment purchases. It would be understandable if confusion reigned during the transition period. Instead, the company operates by a set of clear, simple priorities that Braun said helps employees – from the production floor to the office – focus on what’s important and in what order: 1. Safety, 2. Quality and 3. Production.

“My father gets the credit for developing the priorities,” said Braun. “For as long as I’ve known about Custom Rubber Corp., those have been the main concerns, and I embrace them. It’s really easy to push production in front of safety and quality unless you constantly beat the drum of those three priorities, in that order.”

The mission statement is a more recent addition. “I graduated from business school and then joined Custom Rubber Corp. in 2002. I was appalled that my dad didn’t have a mission and vision statement,” Braun laughed. “I did my due diligence – asking my dad and another long-term employee what we had to do to grow our business, stand out in the marketplace... all of those questions I learned in business school.

“The saleswoman who had been with the company for years said, ‘All we have to do is call people back, Charlie.’ That seemed too easy!”

Still, that was the only answer Braun received, so he refined the message and created the mission statement that resonates throughout the company’s interactions within its walls and with every customer and prospect: Responsiveness ~ From Design to Delivery.TM

“The shortness of the mission statement grew out of the success of the priorities” Braun explained. “If someone has been working

at Custom Rubber Corp. for four months and can’t tell me what the mission statement is, that’s useless. It needed to be something that could be repeated.”

What does “responsiveness” mean to Custom Rubber Corp.? “For our customers, it means that we call them back – which is exactly what our longtime employee told me,” he said. “It does not mean that we rush to get things done – it means we communicate and keep our customers and our prospects informed so they know what to expect.

“And, don’t think there’s much difference in what it means for customers and what it means to our employees,” he added. “Communication is just as important among the people who work here.”

The Custom Rubber Corp. website repeats the promise inherent in the mission statement, saying, “We have a serious commitment to providing professional attention and expertise. We’re proud to say the result is satisfied customers; we have had a 98 percent customer retention rate over the last 20+ years.”

It continues, “Our philosophy is built on service. That’s why we’re committed to returning calls within 24 hours. Our target is to provide quotes in two days. When you call Custom Rubber Corp., you never get a voice mail system during business hours. Our focus on your needs starts by actually picking up the phone and having a conversation about your needs.”

At Custom Rubber Corp., customer service is more than a talking point. It’s the foundation of a simple, five-word mission statement.

Shift change improves inventory, safety

In January of 2018, Custom Rubber Corp. implemented a schedule change, moving to 24/7 operations to meet production demands and to respond to employees who were frustrated by constant overtime. The old schedule mandated three eight-hour shifts, but overtime was necessary to meet production requirements – and there was no end in sight.

“We thought there were additional sales opportunities with our main customer,” said Braun. “We were getting the sense they would basically buy everything we could make. However, that resulted in significant overtime, and our employees were getting fatigued and resented the intrusion into their family time. We were concerned

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Custom Rubber Corp. molds products in the consumer goods, automotive, material handling, and oil and gas markets.

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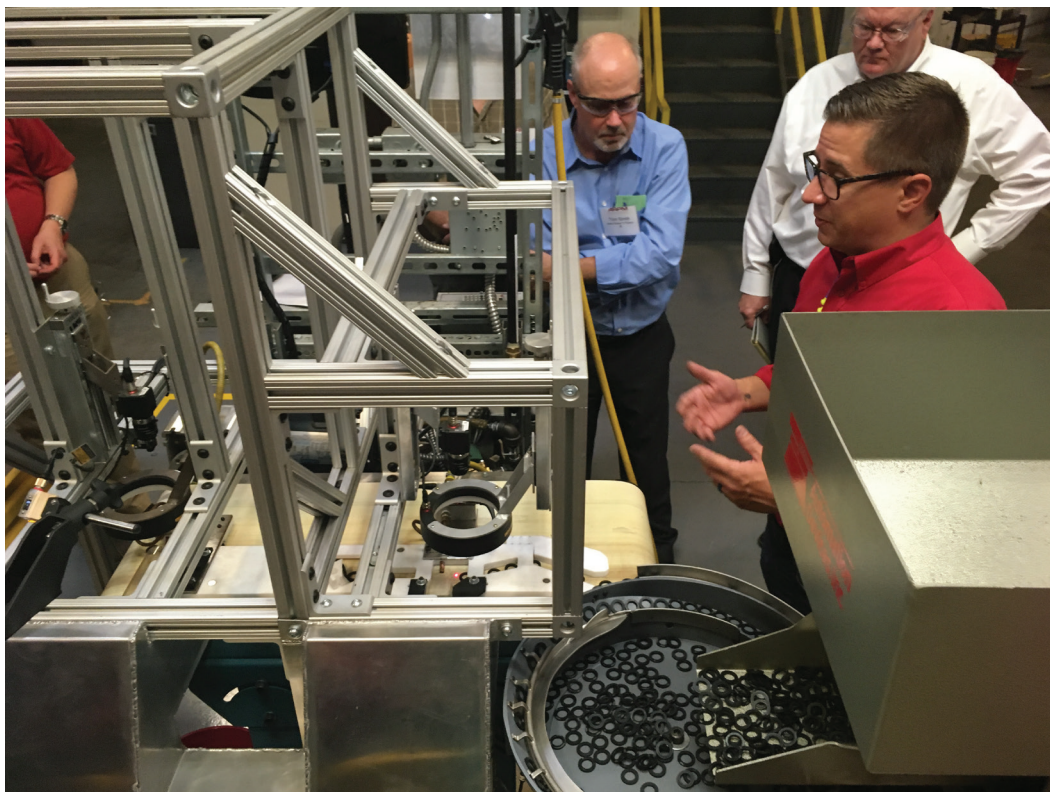
we might lose some of these experienced people if we required them to continue working six days a week.”

Tim Ziegler, vice president of manufacturing for Custom Rubber Corp., proposed a change to a Pitman fixed shift schedule. With the Pitman schedule, four 12-hour shifts provide 24/7 coverage, with each shift working either three or four days per week and every other weekend.

A shift change schedule this extreme could have led to heavy turnover, but Custom Rubber Corp. went to extraordinary lengths to retain employees. All staff members were able to choose whether to keep the schedule that allowed eight-hour shifts, five days per week or move to the 12-hour shift schedule. Those who stayed on the eight-hour shift schedule can volunteer for weekend overtime when it's available. “Organizationally, it's not very helpful to have 12 people working regular shifts when the rest of the company has made a change,” said Braun, “but, we thought it was the right thing to do.”

In addition to satisfying inventory needs for its customers, the Pitman schedule allows more time away from the production floor. Employees who were on site six days a week are now in the building only three or four, which keeps attention levels high and reduces fatigue that could lead to accidents.

While Braun acknowledged that not all of the issues related to the shift change have been ironed out – for instance, shift premiums



Automated inspection processes, developed in-house by Custom Rubber Corp. employees, enhance the company's quality initiatives.

and other compensation issues are still under consideration – the first eight months of the Pitman schedule appear to be a success. “I was skeptical,” he continued. “All the credit goes to Tim.”

Investing in the employee base

A lunchroom may not be the first thing an employee mentions when asked to list company benefits. It may not even be the third or fourth. But, it is representative of the recent investments made by Custom Rubber Corp. to enhance the culture within the facility. The revamped space provides a temperature-controlled area for employee breaks and meeting space for another big driver of company culture – education for employees on the production and operational data collected each day.



“The lunchroom renovation was something that needed to be done,” said Braun. With the change to 12-hour shifts, fatigue was an issue, so “we added a cornhole game, a bubble hockey table and snacks to give employees a chance to recharge while on breaks.”

Information scrolls across television screens in the new cafeteria, sharing employee birthdays and anniversaries. Also shown on the screens is educational text related to press utilization, daily production numbers and more.

“This is another initiative that has been driven by Tim Ziegler,” said Braun. “We hold a 15-minute meeting at the beginning of each shift where we talk about quality issues, discussion production concerns and share the metrics from the previous day, as well as the month to date.”

A large whiteboard in the breakroom is the focal point of each meeting, containing data related to each topic covered. Other discussion points include hot jobs in production or in the finishing and inspection area, and – true to the company’s priorities – each meeting begins with a safety update.

“The other thing we do in the meeting is share revenue data, including total dollars manufactured, total dollars invoiced, credits issued and dollars in scrap” he explained. “That was challenging for me to be comfortable doing, but we started with education to help our employees put those numbers in perspective, and it’s been really helpful. In times when things aren’t going right, we can point to the numbers and they can see it.”

Braun is developing a year’s worth of weekly content to be discussed with employees, from the basics of what lean manufacturing is to more complex discussions on what production numbers really mean. This working document is based on emails sent to management team members during the

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first year of lean production implementation. “My hope is that we can build the binder this year and then repeat the topics in future years as we gain new employees or need a refresher on the content,” he said.

Custom Rubber Corp. isn’t reinventing the wheel. With more than 70 years in business and nearly 40 under the ownership of the Braun family, the company has taken the bedrock principles of safety, customer service and employee satisfaction and built upon them by *executing* what other firms *say* they do. That’s truly a reason to beat the drum. ■