

A decade of partnerships takes shape

TEN YEARS INTO GREEN TIER, PLACON PLASTICS IS A SHINING EXAMPLE OF COMPANIES GOING BEYOND COMPLIANCE AND BUILDING BUSINESS VALUE.

Story by Steve Miller, photos provided by Placon

Many innovative minds began their life's work in a basement, a shed or a garage. From Jeff Bezos' creation of Amazon to Wozniak and Jobs' Apple; from Larry Page's search algorithm for Google to the Wisconsin-based motorcycle manufacturers William Harley and Arthur Davidson — all began as nothing more than an idea. Whether it is a garage or a basement, these famous brands all featured sweat and tears to grow from their humble beginnings.

A new plastics business formed in a basement.

Tom Mohs was one of those innovative businessmen. His interest in the creation of plastics shaped much of his life, dating back to his time as a chemical engineering major at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In the late 50s, Mohs recruited a dozen students and then convinced his engineering-plastics professor to teach one final semester of the exclusive plastics-focused engineering course.

After graduation, Mohs accepted a job with the Monsanto Company and moved into plastics engineering, learning and perfecting techniques, and even designing a thermoforming machine. Ever the entrepreneur, Mohs wasn't satisfied with merely designing products for Monsanto, and he soon moved back to Wisconsin, looking for distinctive markets and product ideas for thermoformed plastics.

In 1961, he acquired his first thermoforming plastics machine, testing his various theories, eventually incorporating Placon in 1966. In the last half century, the plastics company that was founded in Mohs' basement, has become a leader in the industry, as both a

manufacturer of quality plastic packaging and as a catalyst for environmentally conscious recycling efforts.

The early days

Mohs always had specific objectives for his plastic containers. He originally sought to create a box for jewelry that was cleaner, tighter and more easily packaged than others on the market.

In 1980, Mohs created and patented the BlisterBox® a hinged container that has been modified and perfected into one of the industry standards for plastic containers. The container that preceded the BlisterBox® was an injection-molded option that consisted of two pieces; each had to be packaged and shipped separately. Mohs wanted to create something that was one fluid piece of plastic and could be easily stacked, as it would not only last longer, but would dramatically decrease shipping costs and inventory issues.

The small plastic cases Mohs perfected are known throughout the plastics industry for their tight and reliable seals, durable and simple plastic hinges and high-clarity plastic. However, despite seeing quality results, Mohs didn't want



Placon is a leading North American designer and manufacturer of thermoformed plastic packaging trays, clamshells and blisters for retail, medical and food uses.

to lose control over his raw material costs (which reflected the wide swings in the price of petroleum) and sought to create a more predictable source of raw material from recycled plastic.

Around this same time, both consumers and businesses began showing interest in recycling plastic and purchasing recycled materials. Mohs and other manufacturers began to see the value of using polyethylene terephthalate plastics in products, due to the simpler recycling process associated with PET plastic. The environmentally-driven decision to invest in PET has paid major dividends for Placon as the organization grew to integrate recycled PET back into



At the EcoStar® facility, curbside collected PET bottles and thermoforms are sorted out and eventually used to create both food- and non-food grade recycled PET packaging.

its manufacturing stream.

Designing products that feature recycled materials as a raw material is, of course, only the first step. Creating the infrastructure to collect, transport, process and recycle the materials are all part of the recycling infrastructure. With recycling options for PET still in their infancy, Placon answered the call and began to move into purchasing recycled plastics in bulk and establishing its own internal Recycling Department in 1988. This was another crucial step for Placon, and was a key in the path to joining the elite state environmental Green Tier program.



Roughly one billion recycled PET bottles and thermoforms pass through Placon's recycling facility's doors each year.



Going beyond compliance

In 2004, the Wisconsin State Legislature passed a law that enabled the Department of Natural Resources to work with companies to focus on environmental performance and beyond compliance goals. While businesses must maintain a variety of environmental protection regulations, permits and approvals, many of these only measure the minimum standards for health and environmental safety.

Today, the Green Tier program continues to engage companies that demonstrate a commitment to environmental leadership. More than 100 participants have been recognized by the Green Tier program in a variety of sectors throughout the state for going above and beyond compliance performance.

There are many benefits to joining Green Tier. In addition to the recognition and branding benefits, participants report great value in the collaborative relationship with the single point of contact who is assigned to work with each company. The contact is able to assist each Green Tier participant with making connections within the department and identifying opportunities for beyond compliance performance.

performance.

Many companies are strengthening their business by focusing on environmental performance. Their efforts not only assure compliance but also reveal money saving opportunities.

"If you ask companies why they are active in the environmental area, the need to satisfy their regulatory requirements is just one of many important reasons," says Tom Eggert of the DNR Green Tier program and Manufacturing Sector development specialist. "Companies have been establishing their green credentials to attract and retain customers and employees and to reduce risk and save money."

Placon became a Green Tier participant in 2013, joining the extensive environmental leadership program, in large part due to the long history of environmental stewardship and advances in PET recycling.

Taking the next step

With the move toward using recycled

PET, Placon continued the march toward a self-sustaining business practice. The big step Placon took in 2011 was releasing the EcoStar® brand recycled PET.

"There is the connotation out there that plastic is bad for the environment, but here at Placon, we don't believe that," says Tom Mohs' son and Placon CEO Dan Mohs. "You have a raw material that you can reuse over and over again and really minimize the use of virgin resources."

To create EcoStar®, the company's in-house recycling unit takes in recycled plastics, including the very products Placon produces, and converts them back into Placon's EcoStar® line of recycled PET packaging. However, the challenge didn't come without a few kinks.

"Initially it was very challenging to trim the recycled products, but we developed newer ways to slim down on the amount of plastic to be used," says Dan Mohs.

The savings the in-house recycling unit has created allowed the Placon Corporation to grow despite the decelerated economy of the past decade. Ultimately, it all comes back to the firm conviction that recycling PET is both a responsible action and an economically efficient action for Placon.

"The belief of preserving the value in plastic packages has helped us lead and transform the shape of our industry," says Dan Mohs.

Molding a partnership

Placon sought new ways to create plastics, and that innovation was not unnoticed by the Department of Natural Resources. When Placon applied for the Green Tier program, DNR staff was eager to begin a partnership with the pioneering plastic manufacturers.

"Placon was a great addition to the Green Tier program, because of what they've done historically in trying to find an alternative use for recycled PET," says Eggert. "They've created their own supply chain, produced the raw materials, and have created the infrastructure that will allow them to continually manage their supply chain."

"Placon is a good example of a future-thinking organization that isn't just focused on producing good numbers for this quarter or the next quarter," says Eggert. "That focus really exemplifies how we want Green Tier companies to be oriented."



Steve Miller was a communications specialist for DNR's Office of Communications.