

Globalisation has seen the loss of many shoe manufacturers in Europe and North America. This in turn has hit the supply side of the industry in those areas. Some, however, have found ways to survive and prosper.

Adjusting to a changing world

One such company which has successfully made the transition and come to terms with the new global reality is the US company, Styletek. It started life in 1970 as a mould maker and injection moulder of heels for women's shoes. It was soon bought by the Pandel Bradford Corporation which, in turn, merged with Compo Industries. In 1985 it was sold to a group of three Compo employees, Dave Kinman, Michael Fairley and Bob Jones, which was to prove the key to its survival. Michael Fairley unfortunately passed away in 1994 leaving the other two in control until last year, when Greg Burns joined them as a partner and took the position of CEO previously held by Kinman.

The company was widely recognised as an innovator with regard to women's heels and texturing, painting and snap-on and pin-push toplifts were all ideas that it championed. As shoe production increasingly moved off-shore during the 1980s, the industry tried various protectionist exercises. Shoe factories continued to close and the company's customer base continued to shrink.

By 1985 there were only about 20 fair sized heel producers left in the USA and Styletek wanted to be the 'last iceman', the last one left. Plastic pellets still went into the hopper and moulded parts still came out the other end. It possessed unique mould making capabilities and was one of the few in the industry then using CAD/CAM. Furthermore, it had a skilled and willing workforce. Its machines were versatile and could make other products.



New industries

Styletek's plant in Massachusetts was sited in the heart of the US 'high tech' belt, so the first call was to a computer manufacturer. After several failed attempts an appointment was made with the buyer. He asked what they moulded and was shown shoe heels. That was the end of that. A little later, however, someone rang looking for a golf ball for night time play. This proved to be a huge break for Styletek. Not only did it help invent and then produce what is now known as the Nite Lite ball, but it also gained the confidence to approach other industries.

The torque on the fasteners that held D-sub cable connectors to computer equipment needed to be measured. The company helped develop plastic capped slotted jackscrews or thumbscrews

where the slot would break away at a given torque. It started with two local companies, one of which was taken over by Hewlett-Packard. Thumbscrews and jackscrews were soon being shipped throughout the US. Since then, products from a diverse range of industries have been added.

Meanwhile, the production of heels continued on a reducing scale. In 1990, Styletek exhibited at ANPIC in Mexico as part of a Footwear Industries of America (FIA) group. Interest in its heels was overwhelming and the company foresaw an opportunity for big exports. However, it knew little about global trading and thought it would still be able to produce in the US—until it found out that similar products were already being made far more cheaply in Mexico.

Working with Mexico

Nevertheless, it continued to investigate ways to make use of its knowledge of the US footwear industry in the area until the collapse of the Mexican Peso in 1994 put a brake on things. In 1996, the situation improved and the first of many strategic alliances was formed. This first was with a Mexican heel producer and Styletek began to import its products into the US. The considerable technical expertise it was able to provide contributed greatly to the venture's success.

Since then, Mexico has proved an excellent source for leather, components and finished footwear. Its closeness allows fast turn-rounds and easy transportation. The size of its leather industry infrastructure means

Massachusetts
moulded products



that almost anything can be found, from lasts to finished shoes and everything in between. There is also a willingness to produce in smaller quantities. Over the years, a strong network has been built up in Mexico of both individuals and companies associated with footwear.

Many customers call for services from the US manufacturing operation and the sourcing capabilities in Mexico. Listening closely and keeping abreast of customer needs is essential and something the company prides itself on. While the supplier infrastructure in the US has continued to diminish, those shoe manufacturers left still need the same components and services as before. When one of these is no longer available, a source is found in Mexico.

Two businesses in one

Today, Styletek has two distinct but conjoined businesses. One is injection moulding, the other is global sourcing. With the exception of a couple of small moulders, it is indeed now 'the last iceman' as far as plastic heels are concerned. The problem is that the market has all but disappeared, so heels now comprise less than 20% of the injection moulding business, with 80% being anything from golf balls to sewable plastic grommets, shoe shanks, thumbscrews, insert-moulded leather soles and automotive parts.

Lessons learned in footwear component manufacturing, such as being quick to market with new developments and a willingness to make fast turn-rounds and short runs, have all proved useful as the company has diversified. It has never lost touch with its

FOOTWEAR MANAGEMENT

roots however and is still very much involved in the footwear industry. As Dave Kinman, now the company's COO, says, "The approach is simple: if we don't have it, we find it. Whether we produce it or source it elsewhere, we have become a service and information centre for the markets we serve. Indeed, we see ourselves as a service company rather than a manufacturer. We are continually looking at ways to set ourselves apart from others, to re-invent ourselves, if you will." And that, one suspects, is the way other companies can survive in a changing world. 

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