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Passaic Rubber upgrading capacity with new hardware

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BOSTON—Passaic Rubber Co. is expanding its capacity and capabilities with the addition of a longer belt press and a wider calender line.

The maker of endless belting, calendered goods and rubber rolls is installing a 16-foot-long belt press and a 66-inch-wide calender line as part of the firm's ongoing capital investment program.

These latest additions—to be operational by the beginning of the year—bring to about $1 million the amount of money the Wayne, N.J.-based company has spent this year to upgrade its operations, according to President J.D. Mathey. He and Jeffrey Leach, chairman and chief operating officer, discussed the expansion at the National Industrial Belting Association annual meeting, held Sept. 6-9 in Boston.

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The 16-foot-long belt press will give the company more capabilities to make different products, said Leach, who also co-owns the business along with Mathey. It allows the firm to produce five yards of product at a time rather than one yard on its current belt presses. "Business is very steady into new types of products," he said.

The 66-inch calender—to complement the two 52-inch lines already in operation—also will help broaden Passaic's operations. "We do get a demand for wide goods," Mathey said. He explained that most fabric sizes are in 60-inch widths, so the company had to add a labor step to process items on the 52-inch lines. By having the full width available, the firm also will decrease waste significantly.

In addition, having a third calender line provides extra flexibility. For instance, Passaic can run white material on one machine, black on a second and color on a third to eliminate cross-contamination.

The new, larger machine also allows the firm to change rolls on the fly without stopping the machine. "Depending on the job function, we can choose whichever calender is best for the product," Mathey said.

Passaic in recent years has made its name by focusing on its three core niche product areas. Much of their business, the two owners said, has come from being a certified outsourcing supplier for larger manufacturers that can't always focus on a smaller product area. "The big boys don't have the expertise in calendering that we have," Leach said.

One such new area is the introduction of neoprene products used for roof flashing. As the larger roofing companies concentrate on EPDM and other roofing materials, an operation like Passaic can give closer attention to what is probably no more than a $2 million market, Mathey said.

Both co-owners are fourth-generation family members in the business; their great-grandfathers started the company in 1919.

During World War II the firm added different product areas for the war effort, but as years went by that diversity actually was a detriment to a company that had strayed from its core products. As the two took control—with Leach focusing on production and Mathey on sales—they worked to re-position the firm as a smaller niche player.

"A lot of the products we were making, we weren't good at making them," Leach said. From an employment side, that also meant paring the work force, which now stands at 27 full-time production workers, down from a one-time high of more than 100.

That's not to say Passaic doesn't have big plans. It's selling its products globally, using the Internet, trade shows and advertising to get the word out about the company.

And while Passaic is building up its sales by specializing in jobs its larger customers don't want to take on, Passaic took the same approach by not using its mixing operation and buying custom mixed compounds from outside vendors. "Mixing is not in our focus. We can't do everything," Leach said. "If you specialize in something, you have to be one of the best."

Mathey added that the firm is better off putting the money that mixing would have cost back into its manufacturing operation, like it's doing with the current expansion.