

### **ARPM takes a look forward**

*Bill Paige*

The Association for Rubber Product Manufacturers (ARPM) salutes the 125th anniversary of Rubber World's service to the rubber industry as the association glances back at the industry, and more importantly, looks forward.

Although ARPM has only formally been around since 2010, it has roots in older rubber groups, and many of its member companies have long and distinguished existences. The diverse mixture of manufacturers and seasoned executives gives the organization a solid overall perspective on the years past, present and future.

First a glance back

Just like every sector in the international economy, the rubber industry has seen some tough times over the recent decades. A level of inefficiency has contributed in part to the slide.

"What I have seen over the past 20 years in the rubber business is that the manufacturing processes of the late 1990s were still very much like they were in the late 1970s," said Bernard Grégoire, ARPM board member and president/COO of Hamilton Kent, LLC. "However, I believe rubber is finally trying to catch up in technology (automation), similar to what the plastic industry has done."

Other external factors such as offshoring have hurt the industry.

"The foreign competition that we have seen, along with several recessions, have led to many consolidations, mergers and bankruptcies," said Charlie Braun, ARPM president and president/owner of Custom Rubber Corporation. "The result is that there are fewer manufacturers than 25 years ago. Those that are still in business have invested heavily in their operations and have significantly improved their quality and customer focus."

Since ARPM is a new organization, its recollection of the past is much shorter. However, there is a reflection of the past four years that is telling in the change in attitude and direction that is currently taking place.

"I think as it stands today, the rubber manufacturing segment is relatively fragmented as compared with other industries," said Troy Nix, ARPM executive director. "Although company executives in this field make efforts to congregate at annual trade shows, the absence of regular technical meetings, business events and networking activities has put more distance between senior leaders.

"I've seen changes in how our population of members has begun to understand the value of sharing, the value of reaching out to those in need and the value of benchmarking. The introduction of ARPM's open plant tour workshops and its Benchmarking Conference has served to educate executives about new uses of technology, leading edge business practices and innovative manufacturing methods being incorporated on the production floor. Our mantra is 'seeing the process of another will improve your own.'"

## The present

While the domestic market continues to deal with the loss of manufacturing in the past decade or more to lower cost regions of the world, there is a bounce in a positive direction.

“The U.S. sector for manufactured goods is gradually returning after a long downturn and love affair with foreign made products,” Braun said. “Customers are now understanding that the sweet taste of low invoice prices does not always translate to the dependable delivery of quality products.”

With the made in the U.S. mandate on many government contracts (infrastructure, military, etc.) and the re-shoring of many products, along with the move for retail stores to offer more products made here, the United States is starting to be on more solid ground.

“The U.S. is vibrant and full of opportunities,” Nix said. “As a small example, an ARPM member company recently acquired new tooling orders and is now manufacturing rubber products for a domestic OEM that previously was using only Chinese sources for its components.

“When the business decision equation of price plus quality plus delivery plus dependability plus trust are taken into consideration, U.S. rubber products producers have the edge in the global marketplace. That time is now.”

## Looking ahead

The future is becoming brighter in the rubber industry, but only with determination and efficiency by the active participants in the next 25 years.

“There will be more consolidation for both raw material suppliers and manufacturers, along with continued improvements in labor saving automation,” Braun said. “Those manufacturers who understand their costs and stay focused on the needs of the customer will do well.”

The ARPM vision of the future encompasses being the association of choice for rubber products manufacturers. As part of this unique vision, members will possess a camaraderie that is very much different from what currently exists throughout the rubber industry.

The association’s leadership envisions a more unified rubber manufacturing industry working together to improve operations and expand capabilities.

“It may seem to be somewhat of a cliché, but the ARPM directors feel that there is power in numbers,” Nix said. “The power of uniting the industry and bringing executives together for the common good of rubber product manufacturers will ensure a bright and sustainable future for these companies.

“The U.S. rubber manufacturing industry in the next 25 years will be successful in the adoption of automation on the production floor to improve efficiencies, and will find solutions to more easily recycle scrap and rubber material waste. It will also be more flexible to vibrant changes in the marketplace, which will require the management of shorter production runs and higher product mix.”

## About the Association for Rubber Product Manufacturers

Established in 2010, the Association for Rubber Products Manufacturers is managed by rubber business leaders and has over 50 member companies. The association works to provide manufacturers with bottom line impacting programs, networking and additional beneficial

services.

ARPM's focus on generating "needs-based" benchmarking information on industry compensation developments, operational trends and general data on business insurance and other segments positively influences how rubber products executives make informed decisions.

The current ARPM board of directors includes: Kirk Bowman, Carlisle Transportation Products, Inc.; Charlie Braun, Custom Rubber Corporation.; Mark Bueltel, Columbia Engineered Rubber; Joel Edwards, Gates Corporation; Tim Graham, REP Corporation; Bernard Grégoire, Hamilton Kent, LLC; Tim Jarvis, Veyance Technologies, Inc.; Dave Jentzsch, Blair Rubber; Joe Keglweitsch, Ice Miller; Regan McHale, Eagle Elastomer, Inc.; John Truitt, Portage Precision Polymers; and Chris Wagner, Chemspec Ltd.

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