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Nation's Oldest Window Manufacturer Focused on Future

Mathews Brothers bringing on new product lines and tackling new markets

Not many window and door plants still have people putty-glazing single lites of glass into wood sash. But not many window and door companies are more than 150 years old, like Mathews Brothers Co. in Belfast, Maine. Proud of its long history, the company is also focused on the future, preparing now to bring one of the newest technologies in vinyl windows to market.

At the end of 2010, Mathews Brothers welcomed the governor of Maine to its plant to officially launch a new product line incorporating Mikron Industries' EnergyCore insulated vinyl profiles. Targeted to meet R-5 performance demands, the new line represents the latest in a series of initiatives that puts the 19th century manufacturer squarely in the 21st century.

While the new line is designed to offer high performance, it is no radical departure for Mathews Brothers. The wood window manufacturer made that jump in the early 1990s, when it brought on its first vinyl window line. It even went a step beyond vinyl several years later, adding a cellular PVC line. "I don't know if we'd still be in business if we hadn't made the move to vinyl. Vinyl is the majority of our sales now," says Scott Hawthorne, president. During its many years as a wood window manufacturer, he adds, the company never shied away from new products and new markets.

DIFFERENT PRODUCTS FOR DIFFERENT TIMES

Mathews Brothers has managed to survive by building different products at different times. It was involved in shipbuilding at one point. It built coffins during World War II, along with some other products during its long history, Hawthorne states. It was an early introducer of insulated wood windows, an innovation in shop wood windows. "We're big readers of 'Who Moved My Cheese?'" says Hawthorne. "In some ways, it's always been that way around here."

Hawthorne first got involved with the company in the mid-'80s. At the time, he recalls, the Mathews Brothers product line consisted of wood windows and sash. For decades, the company had focused on those products lines and primarily served customers around the state of

Maine, and a handful of two-step distributors handling its "Boston sash" beyond the state's borders. It also operated several local retail outlets.

Seeing the trends in the window market, Hawthorne determined that wood sash and windows would no longer be an adequate business for survival and moved the company into the vinyl business. Starting with an off-the-shelf system, the company eventually made its way into the American Window Alliance, a group of independent vinyl fabricators from around the country that made the same product line and worked together cooperatively on a number of fronts. "We were old wood guys," he says. "We knew we had lots to learn, so joining that group, sharing in their knowledge was a real positive step."

Looking back at the transition to add vinyl, Randy Hall, director of production and a long-time employee, recalls some trepidation. "I was shocked when that decision was made. There were a lot of wood people here. I was not



The long history of Mathews Brothers is evident in its continued production of putty-glazed wood sash.



High performance products are not new at the Maine manufacturer, which offers a full line of vinyl, wood and composite products available with energy efficient glass packages.

Wellness,” with the windows being widening circles—personal and family, corporate, community, nation and even the planet—of what is important to all employees, he explains. “As individual employees and as a company, our actions must support the physical and financial wellness of each of those circles.”

The “Customer Service” element of the phrase focuses in on the fact that to succeed, everyone at the company must work to exceed customer expectations, he notes. “It’s a reminder every day to everybody why we’re here, what’s important to us.” Noting the tough times that have beset most of the industry, he adds, “I don’t believe we would have survived the last four years without it.”

“We put a name to something that was already here,” says Hall, talking about WOW! Customer Service. “We like each other. We care for each other. This is not a place where people just come in to punch the clock.”

alone.” Most people at the company could see, however, that it was important to keep up with industry trends.

One key to transition—and to the continued success of the company with both wood and vinyl products—is that company leaders decided early on there would not be wood people on one side of the plant and vinyl on the other. “It was set up so anyone can go anywhere,” Hall explains. Employees were cross-trained so they could work on multiple product lines—wood and vinyl. “We were going to stay one family.”

WOW! CUSTOMER SERVICE

That one-family mentality was still present in 2006, when Mathews Brothers set out to develop a new company vision. “We wanted to reinvent ourselves. We wanted to look to the future,” Hawthorne states, and a key step in that process was bringing together all the employees and finding out what was important to everyone at the company. “It started as a long list,” he recalls, but what emerged eventually was one phrase—WOW! Customer Service. It’s on employee badges; it’s on bulletin boards and signs, and according to Hawthorne,

“it permeates every aspect of our company.”

WOW! symbolizes “Windows on

The WOW! Customer Service ethic has been key to the company’s lean manufacturing initiatives, states Ralph McDermott, product and process engineering manager. That effort has actually been going on about six years, with Mathews Brothers initially working with an outside consultant, but then taking control of the process internally about two years ago.

One recent element in those efforts was a Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership program that brought continuous improvement training to most of the company’s employees. “That really made a connection with everybody. Coming out of class, people were positive and wanted to act as soon as possible and get involved in their own problem solving,” he reports. The company’s success with the program, which enabled it to achieve an estimated \$75,000 in initial cost savings, earned Mathews Brothers the 2010 Maine Manufacturing Excellence Award.

MOVING FORWARD

Award in hand, Mathews Brothers is now looking to move forward on a number of fronts. The company is not only working to expand its product line, it is also expanding its territory. The company’s locale on the Maine coast represents somewhat of a challenge. First, Hawthorne notes, the building season can be relatively short due to the region’s long winters. The other difficulty concerns the fact that Mathews Brothers has “virtually saturated” the Maine market. While there are still opportunities for growth in New England and New York, much of the area the manufacturer can service comfortably is covered by the Atlantic Ocean.



The WOW mission statement is prominent throughout the facility.

He continues, however, “We’re going to take that negative and turn it into a huge positive.” Easy access to the ocean and shipping opens up numerous international markets, although Hawthorne declined to say what countries the manufacturer is targeting.

It is still looking to grow in the Northeast too, and to do so Mathews Brothers has embraced its long history. “We are the oldest window company in the North and South America,” states Robert Maynes, director of sales and marketing. “But no one had ever heard of us.” Outside its local area, where it had run retail stores, the company’s products were typically sold under someone else’s name, he explains.

In 2009, however, the company decided to change that with a re-branding effort designed to make the Mathews Brothers name more well-known. “We went back to our roots,” Maynes says. To convey the legacy of the company—the fact that it had survived the Civil War, two World Wars, a Depression and more—the manufacturer renamed its product lines after the founders and leaders of Mathews Brothers over the years, he says. It still offers the Alliance Window brand vinyl windows, but the line also features Noah Merrill and Addie Richmond engineered composite windows, O.E. Smith custom wood windows and now, the new Clara Starrett EnergyCore window.

The decision to go with the new high-performance EnergyCore product was made fairly quickly. “We were

looking at retooling for a new line. We were looking at a product that could do a little more structurally, and we knew Energy Star numbers would be getting more stringent,” states Hawthorne. “Then we got news of the Department of Energy’s R-5 program and heard about the new Mikron product at about the same time and it all seemed to click.”

The new line features vinyl profiles manufactured with a tri-extrusion process that creates a structural foam core, providing added insulating capabilities within the frame and sash components. Additionally, it is designed with a wide glass pocket to accept both double and triple glass packages, enabling windows to meet the new DOE R-5 criteria.

“You can exceed the needs of the customer, so we didn’t want to get too far ahead,” Hawthorne states, talking about the decision to expand the company’s line. “We’ve always believed it’s better to stay slightly ahead—to make sure you have the product when the consumer is ready. We think the consumer’s ready now.”

Talking about the company’s long history, Hawthorne notes, “I think we err on the side of caution sometimes. We probably feel we have slightly more to lose. But we’re also patient.” Mathews Brothers is unique, he says, proudly. “We’ve been a family owned business for generation after generation. Not many companies can say that, and also say they’re state of the art. With the introduction of the new line, we can.” ☐



Scott Hawthorne, center, and Randy Hall, right, welcomed Maine Governor John Baldacci for a plant tour when Mathews Brothers announced the launch of its new EnergyCore window line.



The company is set up for initial production of the new line, which is being rolled out this year.