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DOING WHAT ‘CAN’T BE DONE’

WITH MORE THAN 30 years in the industry, innovation, flexibility and perseverance have been cornerstones of success for George Braddon and the companies he founded, Commodore Plastics LLC and Commodore Technology. Retired with his wife, Kathryn, to a house in Florida, George’s primary duties are now, he says, “walking the dog, playing a bit of golf and going out on the boat from time to time.” But George still keeps a toe in the industry and indulges his love of innovation by going into the plant when he is home, talking with the engineers and fielding periodic calls for his thoughts on a problem or question. He recently spoke with Plastics Machinery Magazine contributing writer Lisa Jo Lupo.

In 1981, you were working for Mobil Chemical when you decided to found your own company. Why did you go out on your own?

Braddon: Why did I jump off the cliff? Working for Mobil was great. In 1967, when I went to work there, it was very entrepreneurial. It was run by Howard Samuels; he was the real spirit of the place. But when he left, the company got “Mobilized,” as I call it. It was all about managing the money, and innovation just got more and more difficult. So I left to start my own company.

At the time, Mobil Chemical was the major producer of foam packaging. It looked like it was in a pretty good business, and I had the opportunity to get some used equipment, I also had talked with a number of people in the industry who really wanted another supplier — there weren’t many options. They said they would welcome me being able to supply their trays. So I took the used equipment and started up.

What motivated you to begin making your own equipment rather than buying it?

Braddon: We started with some basic items, but I soon found that wasn’t going to work.

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work. We really needed a whole catalog of products, which would require maybe 15 tools. There was no way I could afford to buy all those tools, so we experimented with ways to make them.

We were the first in the industry to use serrated blades [used to cut foam trays from web], and we were through several iterations before we got the one that worked best, which we still use today with some minor modifications. It took a long time to perfect it. I held a patent on it, which is now expired, but that helped a lot because we were able to build tools very quickly.

As far as equipment, we started out fixing up used equipment and selling them, then we started making them from scratch because there wasn’t any more used equipment available.

Basically, we were cutting them down to the frame anyway, so we were doing more work stripping the old one off and cleaning them up than we would to just cut some tubes up and weld a frame.

What were some of the greatest challenges of the early years?

Braddon: When we started, I didn’t necessarily want to make more trays. The original plan was to make some specialty foam packaging for industrial items, but that never really worked out. We never really could get a breakthrough in that area.

One of the most difficult things was sales. It took a long time to develop the company in the beginning; it was hard to come by sales. Then we hired a sales guy for the summer of ’84 or ’85, a graduate of Cornell [University]. He went to Pittsburgh, then over to Columbus, Ohio, then came back through Cleveland — and he came back with two orders, which was absolutely amazing.

That got us going with some new business, and he stayed with us for quite a while.

So we were going along fairly well by ’85, then the bank started giving us trouble, we ended up getting in a pinch financially. So we merged with a company called Lake Whales Plastics in Hopedale, Mass. We thought the merged company would be better. But since we were sort of drowning at the time and they threw us an anchor, it didn’t really help, and in 1987, we went bankrupt. We were in Chapter 11 for about a year. So we shut down the Hopedale operation, got out of Chapter 11, and kept growing. We’ve had compounded growth ever since — well, not really. We had another trial in ’91, we had the fire. That really killed us for a while.

Tell me about the fire. Obviously, you persevered, and Commodore began building machines within a week afterward. How did you make that possible?

Braddon: The whole building burned down on the fire. We had a fire extender and two transformers there that burned the whole facility down. We bought the equipment the old one off and cleaning them up than we would to just cut some tubes up and weld a frame.

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What do you see as your greatest reason for the success and longevity of the company?

Braddon: We are good at being flexible. A big company has a big extruder, and it’s like they’re driving a bus. But we’re running a route in a Corvette, so we can be a lot more maneuverable. The big guys run a sheet width and design their molds to fit that width. We build our mold to fit an efficient layout, then make the extruder sheet to match it, so that way we have less scrap. The business is pretty well predicated on the fact that you have to recycle all the scrap. We’re selling resin, really; if we throw out resin, that’s a big cost.

What do you want your legacy to be?

Braddon: That I’m absolutely crazy. Being a contrarian — you gotta do what they say can’t be done. You have to innovate. If you don’t, you’re going to get run over.!