

# Flexaust Celebrates 80 Years of Hose and Ducting Solutions

*Speaking to Mike Harvey, Vice President/General Manager, Richard Meyer, CEO of Schauenburg Hose Group, Mike O'Brien, Vice President of Sales & Marketing, and Susanna Vandenberg, Marketing Manager at Flexaust, it is immediately clear that these individuals love working together. Despite explosive growth, the company still feels like a family to the many employees who call it home. On the eve of its 80th anniversary, Hose + Coupling World was grateful for the opportunity to peek behind the Flexaust curtain, discussing everything from silica dust to STAMP, and how one engineer started a company that today services such a breadth of industries and applications that "it would take a full day to list them all."*

*By Jody Hewitt, Editor*

Flexaust has been manufacturing durable flexible hose and ducting solutions for industrial and commercial applications for 80 years. Its hose products are primarily used in applications involving air, dust, fume and lightweight materials.

The company's origins date back to 1938, when Arizona mining engineer Harold Hersey developed a flexible hose constructed of neoprene-coated cotton adhered to wire, making it possible to vent fumes and bring fresh air to hard working miners. Heavy construction and a booming industrial sector triggered by World War II saw the company's transition from mining to industrial applications, and after the war, it continued to expand by supporting industry with hose and ducting to improve the workplace environment.



*Some members of the Flexaust Sales Team at an industry conference.*

The company offers a wide selection of products including wire reinforced coated fabric hose, wire reinforced plastic hose, hand-bendable metal ducting, all plastic wet or dry vacuum hose and blow molded corrugated tubing products. It uses an array of materials including thermoplastic rubber, polyurethane, PVC, neoprene, polyester, vinyl fabric and polyethylene to manufacture a broad range of products—anything you can extrude, glue, crimp or sew.

## **Identifying a problem, developing a solution**

The times, they are a-changin'. For a company entering its 80th year in the industrial supply industry, Flexaust knows this better than most. In the past twenty years or more, the different types of applications—particularly severe-service applications—and demands of the market have increased tremendously. "Heat and abrasion resistance, electric conductivity, static dissipative, explosion-proof applications... it is absolutely mind-boggling the different applications and requirements we see today compared to twenty years ago," says Harvey.

Listening, it seems, has been the secret weapon that has allowed the company to adapt, move into new markets and continue growing. Keeping an eye on new regulations and an ear to the ground has been a critical element of its product development strategy and long-term success.



*Flex-Lok® Hi-Temp Clip Hose.*



*Multiple Cuffing Solutions.*



*Tiger Tail® Septic Pumping Applications.*

“Take for example silica dust,” explains Vandenberg. “The particles are very small, you can’t see them, but inhaling these small particles can cause lung and other diseases. When the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) came out with new silica regulations, we knew that it signaled a shift in the industry. We were able to drill down, peel back the onion and identify a need in the market.”

The next step, according to Vandenberg, is to engage in conversation and get the ball rolling on finding a solution. “Typically,” she says, “if one person has a problem, other people do. We have a system in place that allows us to communicate effectively across regions and share information with each other. If we solve a problem in one region, we make sure we know if there are people in other territories who could benefit.”

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*-Susanna Vandenberg, Marketing Manager*

Once a need is identified, it’s up to the engineering department in Warsaw, Indiana, bolstered by the technical expertise of its international sister companies, to design a practical solution.

“It is very rare,” says Harvey, “that our engineers will just design a product and expect our sales team to sell it. First, we listen to our customers—the distributors—to find out the pain points of the end user. Then we take that information back to our engineers to develop products that will meet a specific need or eliminate a specific problem. Often, the product that was developed to solve one specific problem, perhaps for one specific customer, ends up rolling out into a complete product line with different diameters and lengths.”

Customized solutions, which have become common-place in the industry, account for approximately one third of the products that Flexaust makes. Whether the request is made by a distributor or directly through an OEM, the company can customize for size, color, temperature, flex life and

pressure resistance. According to Harvey, it has hundreds of customer-specific part numbers designed for specific applications unique to individual companies.

#### **New markets, new possibilities**

From its humble beginnings in the Arizona mines, Flexaust has innovated its way to a top position in many of the markets that they serve, particularly dust collection, agriculture and commercial vacuum.

Starting in the late 70s, the company developed plastic hose technology in partnership with Schauenburg Hose Technology Group—which would acquire Flexaust in 1995—and has steadily expanded on its range of products and industries served. The early 90s saw the introduction of metal crimp technology and Teflon products, while the early 2000s marked the company’s entry into the residential floor care market.

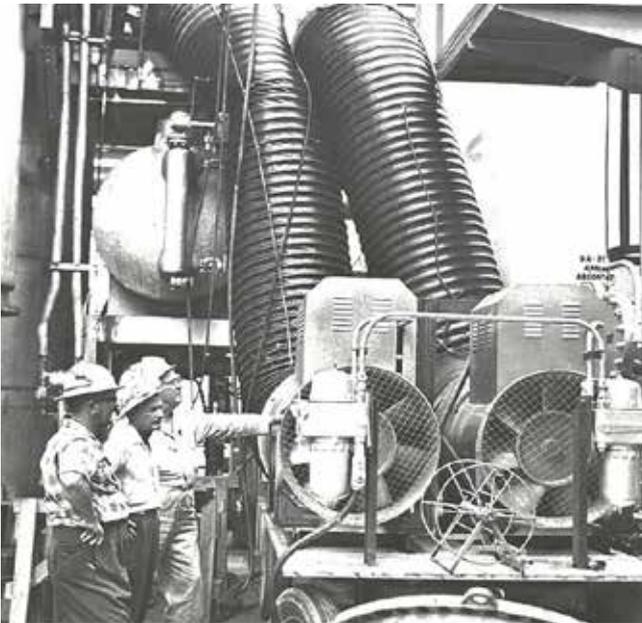
With the 2008 opening of its manufacturing facility in Amesbury, Massachusetts, and the development of its Flex-Tube® line—a series of all plastic co-extruded thermoplastic hoses—the company went through a period of explosive growth.

According to Vandenberg, this was a turning point for the company. “We saw that we were on track and we started expanding. We began manufacturing more and opened additional manufacturing facilities across the country.”

In 2015, the company launched its FX series, a heavy-duty stitched coated-fabric hose designed for portable and temporary heating and dehumidification applications, ideal for outdoor events, construction sites, weddings and extreme weather events. “Flooding can cause a lot of damage to buildings,” explains O’Brien. “After you get the water out, you need to dehumidify the building to prevent mold. We were happy to be able to provide that solution to a lot of customers.”

The product line was developed in response to customer demand and supported by stockholders, who provided the required capital based on the company’s proven track-record. Today, the company has manufacturing capabilities including blow molded assemblies, over-molding end





Manufacturing crew, circa 1955.

finishes and stretch vacuum hoses. It can produce vacuum hose to its customers' unique specifications, thereby providing customized hose system solutions.

"Our growth has been based on finding new markets," says O'Brien. "As we expand and consider new places to go, we think of our customers and how we can add value to our products. This mindset has led us to do different things to the ends of our hoses, such as the over-molding solution we offer to our OEM customers to create a clean, professional-looking OEM product. Acquiring this technology was a significant investment, but the possibilities of what we can do with it are endless."

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*-Mike O'Brien, Vice President of Sales & Marketing*

#### All the data you can handle

A common complaint among end users of hose and coupling products, and industrial products in general, is the lack of availability of data. Often, it is not that the data is unavailable, but that the expectation of where and how quickly they can access that information has changed dramatically.

Today's end user does not rely on sales people to bring them information; they go find it themselves. More often than not, engineers and purchasing agents will have researched the product online long before they start the process of ordering.

As the industry became increasingly populated by Generation Y-ers, Flexaust adjusted its communications strategy to cater to the needs of these new end users—even though the company sells almost exclusively through distribution. On the website, anyone can access specifications, features, and technical data sheets for any product



Mike Welk, Regional Sales Manager, circa 2018.

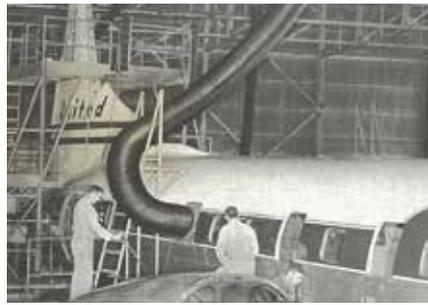
in the company's offering in order to choose the hose that will be the best fit for the intended application. Each product listing also includes suggested market applications, and end users can even order product samples so that they can see and feel the quality of the hose in their hands. Hose + Coupling World asked Mike Harvey why Flexaust would write web content directed to the end user, who is not its direct customer.

"End users do not buy our products directly," concedes Harvey, "but it makes it easier on the distributor to sell our products. We make it easy for the end user to go to our website and figure out what they need. Using the STAMP method, they can narrow it down to maybe three or four hoses that would suit their needs and then go to their distributor and order it."

Making it easier for the distributor to sell its products is part of the company's "everybody wins" lead-generation strategy. Thirty years ago, the role of salesman was a very different thing. Companies had more time to invest in training and personnel, and there were fewer products and applications.

"Nowadays, everyone is so busy," explains Vandenberg. "We're doing more with fewer people. Most salesmen are representing many different lines of product, and it is impossible to memorize every detail of every product you might have to offer—but the technical data is so important. That is why the information is accessible to anyone on the website. It helps our relationship with the distributor because it makes it easier for them to do their job. The easier we can make it on the distributors who promote and sell our products, the better it will be for both of us."

Considering that the majority of Flexaust products go to market through distribution, a collaborative approach to working with distributors has been a home run for the company, allowing them to exceed their sales budget in 2017.



Flexaust has been manufacturing quality hose and ducting solutions for dust, fume and materials handling for 80 years.



Flx-Thane® MD Dust Collection.



Dehumidification Blower Duct.



An innovative newly developed product.

### “Have fun, make money”

The company shows no signs of slowing down and has enjoyed an enviable position in the industry in terms of reputation and sales. This is thanks in part to its five core principles, which include a commitment to serving its customers, investment in its employees and integrity in everything it does. Richard Meyer, CEO of Schauenburg Hose Group, explains how keeping a decentralized organization has allowed Flexaust the room to grow into the largest company in the Schauenburg group:

“Within the group, which is comprised of seven companies, we allow each officer the autonomy to make intelligent decisions based on the customer, geographic and market needs specific to its location. Many organizations take those decisions away from the individual companies. Within our group, the independent officers steer their own ships and all seven companies have been able to flourish because of that structure.”

*“...we believe that enhancing the lives of our employees helps us to serve our customers better. We want people to enjoy coming into work.”*

*-Richard Meyer, CEO of Schauenburg Hose Group*

He added that in addition to these core principles, the company has a mantra: have fun, make money. It was clear when we met with the Flexaust team at the 2018 IDCO Expo in Fort Worth, Texas, that Meyer was not simply paying lip service to this philosophy. Visiting the Flexaust booth on the expo floor felt like coming home to a big family get-together—minus the drama.

“We want to enjoy the journey and do well. We try to find a good middle ground, and we believe that enhancing the lives of our employees helps us to serve our customers bet-

ter. We want people to enjoy coming into work. It's a jokey mantra, but there's a deeper meaning behind it,” he says.

### Fast forward to the future

We asked our interviewees what they saw for the future of Flexaust. After finding success through diversifying its product offering and through strategic acquisitions including the 2012 acquisition of The United Electric Company (TUEC)—thereby expanding into the world of floor tools, wands and accessories—it appears that new facilities are on the horizon.

“We would like to continue to grow Flexaust by expanding the number of locations we have across the country,” says Mike Harvey, “to better serve the customers in those markets. We want to make it easy for them to do business with us.”

O'Brien adds: “We have goals for continued growth, and it is important for us to reach that goal by setting up the next leaders of the company. We spend a lot of time developing outside talent so that we leave this place better than when we started.”



“He did it!” Mike O'Brien and Mike Harvey have a laugh at the 2018 IDCO Expo in Fort Worth, Texas.

