

Earplug Business Booms from \$2,000 a Year to Millions

by Jim Stickford

They may not make much noise, but the folks at McKeon Products, manufacturers of Mack's line of earplugs have built a worldwide distribution network and have been honored by the U.S. Department of Commerce for the company's export efforts.

McKeon is located on Guenther in Warren and got its start in a most humble fashion, said Jennifer True, the company's international sales manager.

"Our founder is Ray Benner," True said. "He was a symphony orchestra player in the Cleveland Orchestra. He played bass. In 1962, he came across a former pharmacist who was making earplugs. The pharmacist was retiring."

Benner and his wife Cecilia, a cello player, were friends with the pharmacist who said he'd sell them his business for \$2,000. The business at the time was clearing \$1,400 a year, True said. They decided to take him up on his offer.

In those days – the early '60s – symphony players tended to go from gig to gig, so the couple, who were originally from Detroit, ended up back in the area and started their earplug business.

The secret to their success, True said, was going after and getting the endorsements of doctors and pharmacists.

"They started off making their plugs in their basement," True said. "Their home was in Pleasant Ridge. And they started off selling to doctors and pharmacists."

That kind of endorsement really helped cement the company's reputation in the public's mind. By 2005, the company had grown so big that they had to move from one location in Warren to their current location on Guenther, True said.

McKeon Products owns the building. It is divided into two sections connected by a large hallway.

The front section is for administrative offices and the back section was originally just meant to be for storage, but they've grown so much that part of the back section of the building is now used for offices.

They became international back in 1989 when Mack's Earplugs were sold in Mexico.

Before they started selling internationally, the company built a national network, which was easier thanks to some local busi-

ness that were in Michigan at the time.

"You have to remember that for a long time Kmart was based in Troy and Meijer's is still in Michigan and they really support local companies."

And because the Benners started out by going to doctors and pharmacists, Mack's Earplugs enjoy a reputation for quality.

"Think about it," True said. "Why take a chance with your hearing? Earplugs aren't that expensive so getting the best is not a big sacrifice."

True said the company has its own Research and Development department that is constantly working with new materials and designs.

"What can be done with foam alone over the past few years is amazing," True said. "We have earplugs that are made of memory foam. When you say memory foam, most people think of pillows or mattresses. Our number one earplug is made of moldable silicon and can conform to the shape of your ear."

Most of the earplugs are made at their Warren site, True said, but they have some that are made elsewhere using McKeon's tools and dies.

They are able to be sold internationally through a network of distributors around the world, True said.

Currently, they sell their products in 71 countries and their packages are written in 14 different languages.

"It can be tricky writing a package in another language," True said. "It's not as easy as people think and people don't think it's easy to begin with."

Part of the problem is idiom, True said. In the U.S., we've used the initials of ENT to mean an ear, nose and throat doctor. So a package meant for distribution in the U.S. can tell people to consult



Jennifer True of McKeon Products with some of the earplugs they make.

with an ENT if hearing troubles occur. You can't use ENT in a package in Spanish, True said.

"What you need to do is state information that is scientifically and legally accurate while rendered into an idiom that will be understood by the user," True said. "And it has to fit on the package."

The company uses local Detroit translation services as well as translators operating in the areas where the products will be distributed, True said.

And thanks to the Internet, it's easier than ever for international outfits to contact McKeon's to arrange business relationships.

True said that the company was honored for its export business in 2012.

"You had to have significant growth in exports for four consecutive years," True said. "So if you had a hiccup with exports and had an off year, you started back at square one. We were the only Michigan manufacturing firm to be honored this year and were one of 55 companies in the

entire country awarded for our exports."

As to the future, it's business as usual, True said, expanding exports and developing new products using new materials. She said that McKeon's is a privately held company with sales in the millions of dollars annually. Exports account for about 15 percent of sales and are growing.

"We are a consumer-based company," True said. "We have earplugs that are specialized for use by musicians and for shooters."

"There will never be a perfect earplug to block out sound because sound travels in waves and penetrates bone and tissue, but we will always work at improving our product for our customers."

GM Adds 50,000 Square Feet to Its Battery Lab

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battery systems designed for use in future GM vehicles around the world.

The lab will also play a critical role in assuring GM's current generation of electric vehicles maintain their battery leadership position, Kelly said.

Teams will validate and test updates to existing chemistries and system designs to make the most of performance and reduce cost. For example, updates were made to the battery system in the 2013 Chevrolet Volt that added three miles of EV range, Park said.

"GM is committed to vehicle electrification," said Larry Nitz, GM's executive director of Global Electrification Engineering, "and our products in this area must continue to excite customers."

"A critical part of this plan is to deliver safe, reliable and affordable energy storage systems. The new capabilities of this lab will enhance our engineers' ability to design, develop, process and validate class-leading products to meet the needs of our growing customer base."

In addition to the lab in Michigan, GM also operates battery labs in Shanghai, China, and Mainz-Kastel, Germany, which are tasked with testing and validation of battery cells, packs, and advanced battery system development.

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