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Crates made at Mack show manufacturing coming back to US

By Patrick McArdle
STAFF WRITER | July 30, 2012

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ARLINGTON — Mack Molding’s new product line for a New York City entrepreneur highlights the trend that some manufacturing is coming back to the United States after several years when China was the default choice.

Having products manufactured in China was becoming a

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“knee-jerk” decision for North American companies, according to Mack’s president of northern operations, Jeff Somple.

“Everyone just made this assumption that it had to be cheaper in China and as a result, everything started going to China,” Somple said. “My take on it always was, ‘This is kind of like a stampede here’ and not everything should be made in China.”

Now that companies have been through a few product development cycles, he said, they realize there are increased shipping costs and problems developing complicated products with a manufacturer from another culture, in another time zone, and speaking a different language.

Mack has been deliberately pursuing products that its leaders believe should be manufactured domestically.

“We’ve been waiting for this,” Somple said. “We’ve been very fortunate that we’ve been able to continue to grow with some really, really, good aggressive selling and marketing, and going out and finding these opportunities.”

A recent example is Quirky.com’s Crate System product line. The building blocks of the system resemble the plastic milk crates that were once a staple of college dormitory rooms, but supplementary pieces can add drawers, legs, a dry-erase board and hooks.

Quirky.com is an unusual company that allows its staff and fans to choose which products it will manufacture, based on proposals from anyone who wants to submit an idea. The chosen proposal is developed by Quirky.com staff and the person who submitted the idea receives royalties.

Somple said Quirky.com’s founder, Ben Kaufman, came to Mack Molding needing a quick turnaround for the Crate System to have it in Target stores by summer.

“I think Ben realized with his time frame and his commitment to Target, he couldn’t do this offshore,” Somple said. “Speed is an

advantage the U.S. has compared to launching a program in China.”

Mack was able to find a company, L&Z Tool and Engineering of Watchung, N.J., that could quickly make a “tool,” the device shaped like the product that goes into the plastic-injection presses.

Producing the crates brought some surprises and challenges. Somple said Kaufman wanted his staff to see the first press run of the product so 63 people traveled to Arlington from New York City.

Much of the production process was filmed and the videos have been posted on Quirky.com’s website.

Mack staff learned late in the process that the first shipment of about 10,000 pieces had to be packaged locally. Somple said that wasn’t Mack’s usual process, but staff members volunteered to take extra hours to get the shipment ready to leave Arlington by June.

The Crate System is now available at Target, Staples and OfficeMax as well as at online orders.

One of the most unusual aspects, Somple said, was that during the production process, he did some research and found that Mack used to make plastic milk crates in the 1960s. They were first made for a dairy farmer but progressed to other uses. A Mack catalog from the 1960s has an advertisement for using the plastic crates as furniture — which Somple said shows that the idea has come “full circle.”

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