



FOCUS: MANUFACTURING

Bead firm shifts model to succeed



BELINDA BATON, a 33-year employee of Hope Valley-based Greene Plastics Corp., works on a Victorian Lace bracelet that is one of several new products. After decades of catering to the wholesale trade, the firm has begun selling more items directly to consumers.

PBN PHOTO / MARY LAUZON

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The jewelry manufacturing business has been shrinking for decades in Rhode Island, but Greene Plastics Corp., which makes more beads than any other company in the United States, has used innovative production methods to keep growing since it started in 1932.

The manufacturer employs 120 in Hope Valley. Now, in an effort to expand sales, it is trying a new approach. In the past year, the company has shifted its business model to include online sales and an open-warehouse sale, which might become a semi-annual event.

"The change wasn't contingent [to] our survival, but we felt that we could start delivering the product directly to the consumers," said Oksana Allman, sales, marketing and online coordinator for the manufacturer. "It was more to do with our organizing our inventory and management, because we used to only deal in huge quantities and volumes of beads."

Barbara Gordon has worked at the Beadery – the company's retail arm that sells online do-it-yourself retail products – since 1987. She now operates a computer data interchange for point-of-sale data and sales forecasts. Regular wholesale customers use the interchange to enter their orders into Greene Plastics' system.

Gordon's job has changed significantly since she started with the company in 1987 as a customer service manager.

"We had an inside computer system, no e-mail. When I first started here we had no fax machine," said Gordon. "Things have changed a lot. Then, basically all incoming calls were the way orders were placed or they were sent through the mail and hand-entered."

Greene Plastics manufactures a range of sizes of injection-molded beads that are sold wholesale to companies in 30 countries. They are made of styrene plastic or acrylic and can be made in any color, thanks to a special system that can re-create the color of any object. Innovative machines like that are what has kept the company moving forward, said Allman.

"We have the expertise – a lot of the machines we run are all proprietary and are designed by our engineers," Gordon said. "Everything is automated, so that's how we're able to compete in the ever-changing marketplace."

Gordon said that retail product production – mainly packaging and bagging beads in kits – has become more streamlined during previous years. In 1990, the company built a warehouse across from its production facility – optimizing its operation, which had spread to a distributor in Westerly.

"Now, since we built our new warehouse across the street, everything's manufactured on one side and then it's just sent across the street where all the packaging and shipping is done," said Gordon.

Founded in Wakefield in 1932 by Oliver Watson Greene, the company moved to Canonchet Village in Hope Valley during the 1950s, when William White purchased it. In 1985, it was sold to an employee stock-ownership trust, with profits and shares being split between employees. That's led to heightened employee retention and a still-growing amount of staffers.

"There's definitely been an addition over the last 10 to 15 years of staff," said Allman.

Now, the company is looking to the community for increased retail sales. Allman said many neighbors might not know the company exists – a condition she hopes to remedy with a warehouse sale, scheduled for Oct. 6 and 7, that will be an extension of the Beadery.

"We've always had a Web site, but last year we started an online retail store. So this was the first time we were able to ship directly to consumers," said Allman. •