

PRP Manufacturing – Three decades of innovation and progress

As it prepares to celebrate its 30th birthday, South Australian company PRP Manufacturing is looking firmly towards the future, putting a firm succession plan in place, and developing innovative new technology aimed at streamlining operations in its factory and warehouse. By Carole Goldsmith



PRP produces customised solutions such as rubber products, sponges, thermal insulation, packaging, protective case inserts, enclosures and stencilling.

Based in Dudley Park, in Adelaide's north-west suburbs, PRP Manufacturing plans to hold a celebration event around June to mark the company's 30th year in business. Loyal customers who have been buying its products since the company first started will be VIP guests at the event, and PRP's founder, owner and Director Steve Sernecki is keen to catch up with several long-term clients. He mentions Ken and Christine Bridges, who own B&R Enclosures, a designer and manufacturer of electrical enclosures headquartered in Queensland, with distribution centres worldwide.

"When I first started the business, I asked Christine if B&R would support my new venture," recalls Steve. "She said yes, and B&R Enclosures has stayed loyal to us for 30 years. We have been supplying them with thousands of gaskets for their electrical enclosures over that time."

Another company that has been a customer since the very start is Philmac Pty Ltd. The Adelaide-based manufacturer of polyethylene pipe fittings is famous for developing the world's first press-button toilet cistern – another Australian great invention.

"Philmac also approached us during those founding days to make potable grade rubber washers for their export market, and we still supply them to this very day," Steve adds. "The count would be totalling several million by now."

Steve first set up PRP in 1991 as a die cutting specialist operating from a site in Holden Hill. Steve's son Luke Sernecki subsequently came onboard and today serves as PRP's Chief Operating Officer. By 2012 the business had expanded significantly, so a new facility was constructed in Dudley Park comprising a modern warehouse and production facility. Recently the company has been developing a range of new technology and software for its warehouse and factory, based around the 5S workplace organisation methodology. Toyota first developed 5S, which is founded on five principles starting with the letter 'S': Seiri (Sort), Seiton (Systemise), Seiso (Shine), Seiketsu (Standardise) and Shitsuke (Sustain). The 5S principles can be applied to help with organisation in any business setting, manufacturing site or even the home .

Luke is very excited about the new technology: "We've been doing some interesting work in the software space, encapsulating process efficiency, inventory management, 5S Lean manufacturing principles and industry 4.0 technologies, such as sensors and IoT (Internet of Things). Several of our employees are trained and qualified in Lean six sigma and 5S methodologies.

"This software will be an exportable product for our business," Luke adds. "It monitors all the workflow, production processes, products and warehouse storage. The software also has a QR tracking system to track our inventory from arrival to the warehouse shelves. We have recently been accepted in the Federal Government's Entrepreneurs' Programme, so we can continue to work on the software to develop it even further for our business, and for export."

Getting started in business

Steve reflects on how he first embarked in a career in the rubber industry, long before he started PRP: "As a boy from school, I got a job as a clerk at Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, now a subsidiary of Bridgestone. They saw that I was keen, and when I was 18 they offered me a job on the road in sales, as a company representative looking after the automotive side of the business.

"As I matured, my confidence grew. I was gaining a lot of knowledge in the rubber industry and was generating new sales for Firestone, then later with BTR, who purchased Firestone's interest in Australia. I decided it was time to set up my own business and have never looked back."

In his first year of business, Steve had a lucky break. General Motors (GM) approached him through another representative company to build a rubber isolation system for its automotive fuel tanks. He built the prototypes free of charge and GM sent them to its then-subsidary Opel in Germany for testing.

Steve recalls: "A few months later, two GM representatives came to my small workshop. They asked if I could provide GM with the isolation system for its Commodores, being built in Australia, in line with GM's quality control."



PRP's founder, owner and Director Steve Sernecki (right) with his son Luke Sernecki, PRP's Chief Operating Officer.



PRP Manufacturing's purpose-built facility in Dudley Park, South Australia.

PRP went on to supply rubber components to GM for more than nine years, and that steady flow of work gave the company enough money to build the business, employ staff and buy more machinery. Victorian company Australian Made Rubber Pty Ltd also invested in machinery to support the company.

"My father was a little worried when I started the business," adds Steve. "When it took off, he was proud as punch. Dad worked until he was around 90 and he hand-made some of the tools and jigs we used in the business for many years."

Having a secure income for the business enabled Steve and his wife Joy to send Luke and his sister Hayley to "get a good education". Hayley is an international pilot with Qantas; since COVID-19 hit, she has been doing contract flying. Joy has also been integral to PRP's success, managing its admin and accounts since the business started.

Luke, who will be Steve's successor when he retires, is well equipped to take on the head role. He has an MBA and mechanical engineering degree from the University of Adelaide, has studied innovation and entrepreneurship at Harvard University, and has completed short courses in Lean manufacturing, negotiation and coding – to name a few. His career before PRP has been in operations and management, and he also founded his own laser cutting business, StencilSmart.

"As well as Luke becoming our CEO, we have also constructed an advisory board, as part of our succession plan," Steve explains: "Luke has been developing our new website and we have a great new corporate video, which will promote the business far and wide."

Has COVID affected the business? Steve says it hasn't: "No, but when the pandemic hit early last year, the Adelaide Hospital asked us to manufacture 55,000 plastic face shields, which we completed in four weeks. Our expertise in high-volume manufacturing came into play.

"I don't think anyone realised how serious the COVID pandemic would become. A specialised non-allergenic closed cell foam was acquired, then we set up full quality and medical requirement controls and commenced production."

Supplying multiple industry sectors

Having originally established itself with extensive experience in gaskets, washers and seals, PRP now manufactures for a wide range of industry sectors, including defence, automotive, manufacturing and construction, mining and resources, transport, air conditioning, electrical and medical. Adopting the latest in CNC flat-bed cutting technology, PRP provides a CNC cutting service and produces customised solutions such as rubber products, sponges, thermal insulation, packaging, protective case inserts, enclosures and stencilling. Its clients are located across Australia.

"In the past 12 months, we have made 2,200 different parts for our customers," says Luke. "One of our current large projects is working with an overseas partner developing an insulating foam product for



Over the last year the company has produced 2,200 different parts for customers across a wide array of sectors.

vehicle flooring for the British Army. We have also fabricated thermal insulation kits and fireproof seating components for use in our national public transport systems.

"Further to this, we create fire-retardant and anti-static protective packaging for many industry sectors, such as defence, medical and construction. Specialised foams is a very important area for us."

The business employs nine full time and four part-time/casual workers and has recently employed a business development officer, based in Melbourne.

Sustainability is a key focus at PRP and it has recently installed a 23kW solar system on the company's roof. Additional panels will be added this year to help balance the growing demand for power. The factory is continuing to operate with a paperless workflow, with PRP's software and technology enabling this to occur.

"We predominantly use our three flat-bed CNC cutting machines for production and with all things going well, we should have additional machines soon," says Steve.

Luke explains that PRP's long-term vision is to create opportunities for its customers: "We will continue to invest in advanced technologies, such as machinery and software, and continue to drive improvement in our production processes and overall workplace. Also, we have an ambitious plan to increase our team to 20 employees and foster a culture that focuses on focusing on our company's principles and values. These are: staying creative, having a love to learn, showing excellence in our work, and having commitment to each other."

Meanwhile, Steve is very positive about the future of the business that he has successfully built over the course of 30 exciting years of innovation and progress.

"All in all, we have created a successful business," he remarks. "Luke and the team will be going forward with a sound platform and I will still be around to provide advice when they need it." **AMT**

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