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## Ox Box Sells Strength You Can Depend On

by Len Prazych

**A**s company names go, few carry the impact and describe the quality of its products like Addison, Illinois based Ox Box. The third-generation, independent wood crate and corrugated box making operation that is today owned, operated and presided over by Guy Ockerlund has its roots in Sweden, where his family of builders and bricklayers left in the 1930s to settle in the Chicago area. Ockerlund's grandfather, Frank Ockerlund, was a contractor who built houses and schools, but when World War II raged and construction in the U.S. slowed to a crawl, he began making wood boxes for the military under the company name Ockerlund Wood Products.

After the war, Frank started a family and his youngest son, Robert, eventually joined his father in the wood crate business. By the mid-1960s, Robert Ockerlund entered the burgeoning corrugated industry and installed a letter press and stitcher to augment his wood packaging business. The name Ockerlund Wood Products was changed to Ockerlund Industries, though the company has been known as Ox Box. Robert's nickname when he was in the Navy was "Ocky." When he came back and got into the box business, his friends and customers referred to it as Ock's box company then simply, Ox Box. Four decades later, the company is as strong as its name and only getting stronger.

"We've stayed the course," says Guy Ockerlund, who assumed leadership and ownership of Ox Box in 1991. "We haven't grown by leaps or bounds but we have enjoyed slow and steady growth over the years." Today, half of the company's business is represented by



**Guy Ockerlund is the owner of third-generation company Ox Box, which started as a wood crate business in the 1930s.**

wood products, primarily pallets and skids, and mostly for the private sector. No more military work. The other half of the business is devoted to corrugated: pallet size boxes, heavy doublewall and triplewall boxes - triplewall represents approximately 80 percent of its corrugated output - and reusable shipping and storage containers.

Since Ockerlund became sole owner of Ox Box, he has continued to invest in both the wood

products and the corrugated side of the business. In 2005, he sold the old plant in Forest Park, Illinois, and bought an 80,000-square-foot building in Addison, where the company currently manufactures its packaging. In 2005, helped by the expansion of triplewall fabrication business, the company generated over \$7 million in sales. By the end of the 2015, Ox Box has grown sales revenue to approximately \$13 million.

Ox Box runs lean. Stan Joray, who has been with the company since 1991, is Vice President and cultivates business and sales on the wood products side of the business. Ockerlund handles corrugated sales.

Back in the 1990s, Ox Box was enjoying success making wood crates and corrugated boxes. It also began making a specialized container for the airline industry that was comprised of both wood and corrugated. Sales of the product had taken off and was soaring through the late 1990s and early 2000s until September 11,



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2001, when the airline industry slumped, thus ending the demand for Ox Box's specialized containers. So the company went back to its respective strengths: wood products and heavy duty corrugated boxes.

It reduced headcount to about 20 employees, bore down and began a growth trend that has lasted for the past 15 years. Many of the employees who were laid off have been hired back and the company now has 30 employees. More hiring is planned for 2016.



The production floor at Ox Box. Pallets are later kitted with a sturdy corrugated triplewall box strapped to it.

Part of the company's commitment to being a world-class manufacturer of big brown boxes was installing a Global Rotomaster 90-inch by 190-inch jumbo printer rotary slotter and in 2005, after selling its old finishing machines and moving to its new facility in Addison, investing in a Bahmüller Double Champion double head stitching machine, which has been the Ox Box workhorse for the past decade. The Double Champion automatically stitches and glues - or a combination thereof - a variety of two-piece corrugated boxes. Its oscillating high-performance stitching head operates at

a speed of 850 stitches per minute, ensuring efficient production of short and medium runs with short set-up times.

"If we were going to do it, we were going to do it right," says Ockerlund of the investment that continues to pay dividends. "We make a lot of kitted boxes, built onto a pallet, with heavy-duty triplewall on the inside sidewalls, tray and cover. The sidewall knocks down flat into the tray so it can be compressed for stacking. And the pallets are heat-treated so it meets all the requirements for export. It satisfies any customer that wants a cost-effective and strong alternative to a wood crate."

The customers of which Ockerlund speaks are not within the expected 150-200 mile radius that is the norm for most small independents in a metropolis. "The



The oscillation stitching head on Ox Box's Double Champion operates at a speed of 850 stitches per minute. It stitches and glues a variety of two-piece corrugated boxes.



Internet has changed things," says Ockerlund. "A lot of customers find us on the web so we ship all over the country, except for California, where logistics and cost make it unrealistic."

In today's world of mergers and consolidations, Ox Box is a rarity in that it has not been gobbled up by a larger independent, a competitor, or an integrated. "We stick to our space and what we know," says Ockerlund. "If we are going to survive, we have to figure out what we're good at, get better at it, and then stay in that niche. That's what we've done, that's what has worked



and I don't see us changing from this course. We will, however, consider other opportunities that are related to what we're doing and apply it to what we already know."

Which is exactly what Ox Box has done with its most recent initiative, Eco-Shield, a weatherproof corrugated box that is a "green" and cost-effective alternative to wood crates.

As great as a traditional corrugated box is for shipping, it can't withstand the rigors of being transported cross-country in the elements. An Eco-Shield box can be in the rain, sleet and snow and will act just like a wood crate but at the end of the day, it's recyclable and less expensive than wood.

The secret to the Eco-Shield's ability to resist the elements, ironically, is plastic from recycled bottles, which is incorporated into its corrugated fiberboard. Historically, corrugated boxes have been coated with or impregnated with wax to achieve protection from the elements but wax boxes cannot be recycled and thus, are sent to landfills. Unlike wax-coated boxes, Eco-Shield boxes can be recycled like corrugated and can replace wood crates, but at fraction of the cost and weight.

Ockerlund provided statistics to support the claim: Americans use approximately 60 million plastic bottles per day, of which about 86 percent, or 51 million, end up in landfills. This equates to 18 billion per year. And because plastic bottles are not exposed to sunlight in landfills, they will not decompose for more than 700 years. Customers interested in "going green," should be impressed by the fact that a single truckload of Eco-Shield boxes saves more than 70,000 bottles from going to landfills.

Ox Box receives sheets of Eco-Shield from a vendor, then converts them on its machinery.

Ockerlund shares the story of a customer who faced the unique challenge of having to ship its rodent control products to the South Pole to help with a conservancy project to save endangered species indigenous to one of the remote islands. The client needed durable, lightweight, weather-resistant boxes in which to ship its product. Wax-coated boxes were unacceptable because they weren't recyclable or biodegradable. A plastic storage solution or Reusable Plastic Container (RPC) wouldn't work because it created a disposal issue. Eco-Shield was the optimal choice. The order for 450 boxes that were deployed by helicopter to the South Pole performed flawlessly.

Eco-Shield currently represents about 10 percent of what Ox Box manufactures but that number is increasing. "We feel the product has tremendous growth potential," says Ockerlund. "Outside of the rare delivery to the South Pole, we are currently shipping primarily in the Midwest but intend to expand distribution throughout

North America. Our goal is to increase awareness that there is a cost-effective, recyclable alternative to wood. The challenge is communicating the message that these waterproof corrugated boxes are durable enough to replace wood crates."

The primary application for Eco-Shield is where boxes are exposed to uncontrolled shipping or storage



**Ox Box heavy-duty triplewall corrugated crates are used by customers in the industrial sector throughout the county.**

environments, that is, the outdoors in extreme heat or cold and in high humidity environments.

According to Ockerlund, most of the company's Eco-Shield orders have replaced industrial packaging. "Cost wise, there's a 30 percent premium over corrugated, but we're going after another market where the option for the customer is not deciding between a traditional corrugated box and an Eco-Shield box. They are deciding between a wood crate and an Eco-Shield box and the Eco-Shield is far less expensive than a wood box."



**Eco-Shield corrugated boxes provide a strong, weatherproof and cost-effective alternative to wood crates.**

Naturally, Ox Box will also make the wood pallet upon which the Eco-Shield box sits, thus creating the most durable of packages that is both weatherproof and well, strong as an Ox. Box.