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Alphapointe Plastics employs the vision impaired, purchases Matchless Molding

By Clare Goldsberry
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For more than 100 years, Alphapointe has been manufacturing products that included straw brooms in its early years, which were sold door-to-door. Today, the Kansas City, MO-based manufacturing company is an ISO-9001 certified manufacturer and plastics processor.

While it may look like an ordinary plastics processing company, Alphapointe is the largest employer of people who are vision impaired in the region. With just over 200 employees, 110 are blind or vision impaired. Alphapointe, founded in 1911, is non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, and while that may at first sound like the company has an unfair competitive advantage, Gina Gowin, director of Development and Public Relations for Alphapointe, notes that being competitive and being self-sustaining is critical to Alphapointe's mission.



Adaptive technology allows vision-impaired employees to do any job in the plant.



Micro-molding machines acquired with Matchless Molding range from 9 to 25 tons.

"Our mission is empowering people to maximize their independence through training and employment," Gowin told PlasticsToday in an interview. "Unemployment rates for those who are blind runs about 70%. We believe that with education, training and opportunities, people who are blind can do what sighted people can do. Our employees prove that every day in our manufacturing operations."

Alphapointe Plastics (www.alphapointeplastics.com/), the plastics processing operations of the organization, performs blow molding and extrusion blow molding, providing some 53 million pharmaceutical prescription bottles annually for Veteran's Administration mail order supply pharmacies across the U.S. "The VA has seven special mail order pharmacies that ship medications to veterans throughout the country," said Brian Bridges, New Business Development manager. "We are certified to meet all the ISO 9001:2008 requirements and all our manufacturing processes and education and rehabilitation programs are also under the ISO standards."

Alphapointe also molds and supplies the military with supplement bottles, spray bottles for janitorial cleaning liquids, and urine specimen bottles. The organization also has two military base supply centers, one at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and another in Little Rock, Arkansas.



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Recently, Alphapointe purchased Matchless Molding, a micro-molding company in Tennessee, and relocated all the assets to Alphapointe's 100,000-sq-ft Kansas City manufacturing facility. The purchase includes eight injection molding machines ranging from 9 tons to 25 tons clamping force.

"We found when looking at this acquisition that our current customers and the market were demanding smaller components, tighter tolerances, and more complex geometries," noted Bridges. "Matchless had a significant number of newer molding machines, proprietary processes, and a well-equipped quality department. They also had a very solid customer base that complements our current customer base in medical and electronics, and now some automotive. We can make extremely small plastic injection molded parts."

Gowin added that the purchase of Matchless Molding gives the company the opportunity to make greater inroads into the commercial market. "We've had a history since the 1930s of selling to federal government customers," she said. "Now we're expanding into commercial markets and diversifying our business line, which is providing new opportunities to create more jobs for people who are blind."

Gowin and Bridges both emphasized that Alphapointe's employees can do just about any job that a sighted person can do, including operating machines and packaging products thanks to "adaptive technology" that accommodate people who are visually impaired and totally blind.

"This technology allows us to provide almost any type of job to our employees," said Bridges. "We also use adaptive items on the machines such as large buttons, Braille, and monitors that blow an image up to one letter on a screen. People who are blind do have capabilities and sometimes just a small tweaking or the use of adaptive technology can give them just what they need to do a job."

Alphapointe (www.alphapointe.org) has several business units including its National Office Supply Store and an Office Products Division. "We produce an entire line of office products, including 15 kinds of writing instruments," explained Gowin. "We also have a partnerships with companies like 3M Corporation to produce and package tape."

In addition, Alphapointe has a partnership with Sealed Air Corp. to do all the printing on their padded mailer envelopes.

Bridges clarified the company's position in the marketplace as a non-profit manufacturer: "We have the same type of market issues that our for-profit competitors do," he said. "We all have to overcome issues such as quality, delivery and price competitiveness. It's a very competitive world and we feel the competitive pressures like everyone else."

Gowin concurred. "We have to be better, faster, and completely capable and we have to overcome the misperceptions of the capabilities of our workforce," she said. "We have to have the same competitive nature as any other company."

Bridges added, "Alphapointe's profits go back into the company's rehabilitations services, educational and training programs, salaries, a low-vision products store, benefits and pensions. We reinvest in our people."

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