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## WORKING HARD AND TAKING RISKS: RAHCO RUBBER'S JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

To some, being given the reins to a fledgling business at 24 years old sounds like a recipe for disaster. For Steve Anton, CEO of Rahco Rubber in Des Plaines, it was a chance for success.

"You have to stick your neck out a little. You need to test yourself and what you're capable of," Steve said. It has been through hard work, going the extra mile, and taking risks that the Anton family has built a business with over 100 employees that manufactures custom-molded and custom-formulated rubber parts, components, and seals for OEMs across the nation.

From the components found in braking systems of major motorcycle OEMs to the critical diaphragm and valves in commercial plumbing applications or an aeration membrane for a waste water treatment system, Rahco Rubber's components are not only essential to the products we use, but are essential to the function of our everyday lives.

Working in unison with customers across many industries, the team at Rahco Rubber designs formulations and manufacturing processes that deliver robust long-term solutions. Raw material selection, flash-less mold and low waste mold design, scrap mitigating practices, and proposing geometry enhancements for manufacturability are all merit-driven approaches that ultimately support the sustainable outcome of such highly-engineered parts.

"Few OEMs have the time, internal expertise, or resources needed, especially when designing, enhancing or optimizing parts for today's lifestyle demands," Steve said. "While we serve that need, it's Rahco's collaborative approach, quality standards and value-added services that make us a true partner to customers— and that's a title we didn't earn overnight."

Though Rahco Rubber has a large presence today, the company's beginnings were small.

Steve's father, Bill Anton, was working for Fidelitone in 1967. At the time, it was the largest manufacturer of phonograph needles in the world. The needles were assembled with a plastic component and highly-engineered rubber, which Fidelitone decided to produce in-house after its supplier couldn't meet the engineering requirements. The small team of engineers, a rubber chemist and a few presses expanded the business and even supplied parts to other industries over time. However, the company wasn't turning a profit.

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"The president of Fidelitone, who was my dad's close friend, told him to get rid of all the rubber activity and sell all the equipment," Steve said. But Bill instead saw an opportunity in custom molding, high-precision rubber and the many applications. He decided to take a risk and offered to purchase the equipment to start his own operation — and not only did his boss agree, but joined in the venture.

"It was Rutherford, Anton, and Hudson — the 'RAH' in Rahco — and Rutherford served as the president of the company," Steve said.

By 1976, however, something needed to change if the business was to flourish. Bill Anton turned to his 24-year-old son and offered him the





Steve Anton shows off a boot used in center pivots and lateral move machines in a farming irrigation system.



Jimmy Anton and Vince Williamson (Quality Control) make sure to get a few laughs in while on the job.



An employee measures chemicals by weight in order to make precisely-manufactured rubber compounds for different products.

company. "I was a top salesman at a computer company at the time, and when my dad asked me if I wanted to help out, I initially said no," Steve said. "Somehow my he convinced me to come into the business. And here I am 43 years later!"

With only three employees and a few presses, Steve began his decades-long work of transforming Rahco Rubber as a leading manufacturer.

Today, the entire family is actively involved in every aspect of the business. Alongside his brothers Jimmy and Jack — who collectively represent 116 years of experience at Rahco Rubber — the Antons continue to lead the business as it grows and evolves in the 21st century.

"I don't want to do things the same way every day. I don't want to do the same things we were doing 25 years ago," Steve said. "If we don't embrace the future and learn how to do things better, faster, and with less scrap, somebody else will."

With the constantly-changing landscape of manufacturing, there is a critical need to invest in technology, resources, and workforce to ensure relevance and to remain competitive in the future.

Another challenge the Anton family tackles is providing design concepts and molding methods that produce little to no waste. "As an environmental advocate, Rahco works diligently to reduce its carbon footprint and landfill impact," Jack Anton explained. "Not creating waste via flashless-wasteless precision molding, using dry ice pneumatic blasting for cleaning and cryogenically trimming components to meet customers' requirements are everyday examples of how we 'walk the talk.'"

Working one-on-one with customers, the team at Rahco Rubber formulates rubber compounds specific to the tasks the parts will perform and analyzes the production designs to minimize residual waste

as much as possible.

While working to modernize the products and processes, Rahco always keeps the same goals in the forefront: work hard, go the extra mile, and take care of your people.

"We've always cared about our workers. Some people have been here 30, even 40 years. We get to know their families and see their kids grow up," Steve said. "We treat them with respect and dignity in everything that they do. People need to know they are important and valued."

Jack Anton recalled an instance where a newly hired employee couldn't afford to attend his father's funeral: "He had been working at Rahco for only a few months, and he didn't have enough money saved to buy the plane ticket back to Mexico. Rahco gave him time off work and helped buy tickets for him and his family to go to the funeral. That's real commitment to employees."

"You're only as good as your people," Steve chimed in. "If you don't treat people the right way, they'll only give you what it takes to make things ok," he noted. "But if you treat people differently, you have a chance of getting their best efforts, their best creativity, and so much more. You just can't put a price tag on that."

With such deep roots, Steve sees Rahco staying in Illinois forever.

"We grew this business from basically nothing. This is our history. Illinois is a very challenging place to be, but we would never consider going anywhere else. This is where our people and our intellectual property and our hearts are," Steve said.

Congratulations to Rahco Rubber and the Anton family for over 50 years of working hard and taking risks in order to engineer components of a higher quality and efficiency. The IMA is proud to have them manufacturing in Illinois. ♦