

Tim Penner – Harper Industries

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Let’s blow up a giant bale of hay!” That comment might not be what one would expect to hear in a typical corporate brainstorming session, but it was the type of tongue-in-cheek idea which surfaced among the creative marketers at one rural Kansas company. The people in this company are not only having fun, they represent one of the nation’s leading producers of agricultural, turf, and hydraulic power equipment. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Tim Penner is President and CEO of Harper Industries in Harper, Kansas. Tim explained that this began with a man named Dewey Hostetler. “He had a knack for seeing how a farmer could use equipment,” Tim said. In his farm shop near Harper, Dewey started designing equipment for handling hay. It worked so well that it spawned a company which was incorporated in 1974.

As a play on his first name, the products came to be called DewEze. The DewEze product line has grown and expanded over time.

The manufacturing company grew in Harper, a rural community of 1,355 people. Now, that’s rural. Tim Penner came from Nebraska and joined the company as an administrator in 1991. The company was bought by out-of-state investors, but in 1998, they decided to divest themselves of the business.

Tim Penner and his staff in Harper stepped up to buy the business. It became Harper Industries and remains a locally owned and operated business today, producing DewEze products and others.

The results are remarkable. The company has gone from a five million dollar business in 1998 to a 25 million dollar business today. Employment has more than doubled and the product line has advanced.

The DewEze hay handling truck beds remain a staple of the company’s business, as these have been refined over time. “We make more of these (hay handling flatbeds) than any other company,” Tim Penner said. The product line now includes various types of bale beds, feeders and related equipment. The company is represented by some 200 dealers across the U.S. and Canada.

Another product line, Harper turf products, relates to turfgrass management. Harper Industries engineers designed a piece of self-propelled equipment that includes a self-leveling, tilting mower deck so that hillsides can be mowed safely. This product was recognized as one of the top 50 innovations by the American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineering.

Harper Industries has continued to innovate. The hydraulic systems used for handling big round bales can have other applications too. “We are now getting into the automotive wrecker market, aerial lifts, and snow removal,” Tim said.

“People are our greatest strength and our number one asset,” Tim said. He proudly notes that the average tenure of Harper Industries employees is 11 years – remarkable in the manufacturing industry.

Company employees also like to have fun. They came up with a creative idea as an April Fools Day project. They decided to stage a video which

demonstrated a mock new product through which big round bales were blown up in the field.

I thought this was hilarious. The video includes a producer testimonial saying how easy it is to “distribute” the hay at the touch of a button. They also videoed Luke Thornton, Harper Industries vice president of operations. With a straight face, Luke talked about how blowing up the hay bale achieved “superior hay dispersal” for the cows. The crew even used an open field to, very carefully, explode a hay bale.

The video was released right before April 1, 2018. As one might guess, it became popular on YouTube. The video reached an estimated three million people on Facebook. Wow. The video ends with the words, “DewEze – April Fools.”

It’s just one example of the fun, creative approach followed by Harper Industries. For more information, see www.deweze.com or www.harperindustries.com.

“Let’s blow up a hay bale!” It’s probably not the typical corporate brainstorm, but it did make a fun idea for Harper Industries. We salute Tim Penner, Luke Thornton, and all the people of Harper Industries for making a difference with an innovative, successful, home grown business in rural Kansas. I’m glad to see that their business has blown up.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.