

Clearing the air

Elk Grove firm's filters help industries breathe easier

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Leslye Sandberg discovered her career path by surprise.

Working as a researcher at Loyola Medical Center in the 1980s, she was attending her sister's wedding when friends of the family started congratulating her for going to work with her dad.

Only she wasn't aware of it at that time.

"One of my sisters said 'What's this I hear about you going to work with dad?'" Sandberg said. "I said 'I have no idea, I suppose I'll go ask him.'"

Her father, Roy Sandberg, was the owner of Permatron Corp. and was considering selling the company, but looked to Leslye to take over the reins.

"It's wasn't really my gig, except it still involved problem solving and process thinking," she said. "So I said, OK."

At age 26, she became CEO of Permatron, which provides a variety of air filtration solutions for commercial and residential customers. The company specializes in custom-built, washable electrostatic air filters for industries that need to maintain constant, efficient air flow in their environments. The company also produces similar air filters for commercial and home furnace systems.

Sandberg says about 80 percent of the company's business is commercial, with the majority of filters designed to be an integral part the equipment they go into. You won't see the Permatron name on the filters, she adds, as they are sold through larger companies, like Carrier or Rheem.

"We aren't necessarily a household name," she said. "The lion's share of what we manufacture is behind the scenes."

All of Permatron's products are manufactured at its Elk Grove Village facility, which contains a machine shop for designing and building frames and a sewing center to create electrostatic filters from a variety of synthetic fabrics. That gives the company the flexibility to custom design air filtration solutions based on an individual customer's needs, Sandberg said.

"We are a solution-based company," she said. "We first talk to our customers to see what they are trying to accomplish, and then create a filter based on what those needs are."

The filters go well beyond home and office HVAC systems, she added. Washable electrostatic filters are primarily used in industries that need to constantly remove airborne particles that could damage equipment or create a health hazard to people working in those environments.

In industries such as mining, paper mills or food processing plants, washable filters are a less costly solution to disposable filters, which would need to be constantly replaced in order to maintain good air flow, Sandberg said.

In addition to large systems, Permatron also makes smaller washable filters that keep convenience store coolers, restaurant pastry shelves, and outdoor vending machines from breaking down under extreme conditions.

The company makes filters that range in size from



Leslye Sandberg, CEO of Permatron Corp. in Elk Grove Village, inspects a new filter with plant manager Roy Montemayor.

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"There are markets that did not exist 10 years ago. That has great scope for our products."

— Leslye Sandberg, Permatron Corp. CEO

a square inch to the size of a railroad car.

The company has been around for 60 years. Roy Sandberg started there as a salesman and bought the company in the 70s, Leslye said, adding that a lot of its growth occurred during the last two decades. There were three employees when Leslye took over leadership in 1986, and it has grown to more than 60 today.

She attributes that success to changes in the market over the years and a focus on networking with other companies in the industry.

As a small company, Sandberg said it was difficult landing large customers because they were wary about the company being able to deliver what was promised. But developing strategic relationships with other manufacturers has opened the door for many projects that has helped Permatron grow into a company that is well-known and respected in the industry.

Permatron Corp.

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Best known product:
Washable commercial and residential air filters

Top officials: Leslye Sandberg, CEO

Brett Wall, president

Number of Employees:
More than 60

"I don't view other companies as competitors," she said. "If there are opportunities for us to work together, I'm more than happy to do it."

One big opportunity came last year when Permatron became a part of Rensa Filtration, a group of air filtration companies that have a history of finding new markets and new solutions, Sandberg said.

"This will enable Permatron to have additional, strong strategic relations and plenty of resources behind us, so we could tackle something even bigger in the future," Sandberg said, noting Permatron's focus in the new alliance will be on research and development.

And that will be advantageous as Permatron works into new markets that will need "mission critical" cooling and filtration systems, such as data centers.

"There are markets that did not exist 10 years ago," Sandberg said. "That has great scope for our products."

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