

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE



How did you start in the business?

In 1985 I bought the company from Jack and Sol, renamed it Skolnik Industries, Inc, and set out to grow the company in terms of product diversifications, customer mix, highest levels of audited manufacturing quality, and international markets. Today, Skolnik manufactures more than 400 types of drums from the headquarters in Chicago.

When I first joined Skolnik in 1978, the company manufactured 55-gallon carbon steel drums. The production line was disconnected, the product quality was marginal and the marketing strategy was “to be \$1 less than the majors” – majors being the US steel manufacturing companies that had far more sophisticated production lines.

However, even with their large capacity lines, it was their weaknesses that I identified and went about creating and filling a market need. Arrogant to their customers, and unwilling to even speak with less-than-truckload users, I began to identify that the small quantity users had no source of supply. Also, small quantity users did not have access to anyone that would help them find suitable compliant packaging for their hazardous material products.

Thus, Skolnik became known as the ‘niche’ or ‘boutique’ manufacturer. Visitors to our manufacturing plant could never understand why we didn’t have high speed indexing conveyors running 55-gallon drums at lightening speeds but when they saw four or five different types of complex drums being made simultaneously, all with differing UN certifications, they scratched their heads and said, “how do you do that?”

Name: Howard Z Skolnik

Job title: President/CEO of Skolnik Industries, Inc

Background: Prior to joining Skolnik in 1978, I practiced architecture, urban design and urban planning at the firm of Angelos C Demetrious and Associates, in Washington, DC. There I was responsible for Master Plan projects in Highland Park, IL; Peoria, IL; Rochester, MN; Malden, MA; and, most notably, Atlantic City, NJ.

It was in 1978 when I returned to Chicago in order to pursue real estate development that I became involved with Skolnik. I saw that by

applying the principles of design to manufacturing, new opportunities in terms of product design, production design, corporate structure, marketing, and more, had opened up to me. Design had become the spine of my involvement with the company.

The lineage of Skolnik dates back to the 1930s when Abraham and Sol Skolnik began reconditioning wooden barrels as Skolnik and Son. After the passing of Abraham in the late 1930s, Jack Skolnik joined his younger brother to begin reconditioning steel drums as Skolnik Drum Corporation. In 1960, reconditioning gave way to manufacturing of new steel drums.

What do you think are Skolnik Industries’ strengths?

Not keeping secrets has been a cornerstone of our marketing success. We are proud of the products we have introduced to the industrial community and soon plan to roll out a packaging that will comply with the unforgiving 30-foot liquid drop test! This drop height is so high that we actually have to rent a crane in order to reach the calculated drop height.

Another strength of Skolnik, which is not a secret, is fostering an ‘out of the drum’ creative ethos from executive management, vice-presidents and managers to the factory operations and transportation. We believe that every function and operation within the company can be continuously improved by efficiency or technology and we reward our staff for making these contributions to our culture.

At Skolnik, we have a culture that is not like any other in our industry in that I treat the company as a design problem. By this, I mean that we have to be educated on the international regulatory requirements so that our products are tested and manufactured in compliance with all the requirements for dangerous goods traveling by road, rail, sea and air.

In addition, we share our knowledge with our customers to help them steer clear from non-compliant packagings, or marginally made packagings that increase the risk of successful transport. In-transit damage or leakage can be costly to clean up, especially if there is environmental damage. Purchasing a drum that offers extra content protection, not minimum protection, is duly justified.

What keeps you going in business?

I’m an artistic, creative, passionate person and in my business I am able to utilise these skills to manage my company, promote relationships with my staff, introduce creative solutions to customer challenges, meet and maintain global business friendships.

I’m not the road-warrior that I was at the beginning of my career, but email and Skype keep me up to date with my global contacts. I used to travel excessively, now I just travel a lot!

What are the challenges facing the business?

With the burst of internet shopping, our customers expect similar service to what they receive when shopping online – immediate order confirmations, accurate production and shipping projections, and delivery accuracy. Basically, our customers want to know what time their drums will arrive at their door, and we have been designing our information systems to meet performance expectations.

Do you have advice for those starting out?

Packaging is a global industry that continues to evolve. For those entering our industry, creative solutions may be hard to find, but they are the path to the future. These solutions may be product, process or performance related and they need to sit on top of the current technology.

Most importantly, it is critical to know that like a salmon that swims against the stream, new ideas are often met with strong currents of rejection. My personal recommendation is to take that new idea and try to grow it virally, be watchful of the debt load, and recognise the importance of the respect of our global network of colleagues.

What do you do to relax?

Packaging is my passion and, as a potter, working with clay is my relaxation – most specifically I love making small to large bowls. Therefore, both professionally and personally, I work with vessels. The clay represents the ultimate creative challenge combining thought with hand work. I consider myself a ‘Gentleman Potter’ and my work can be seen (and bought) at www.chicagopotters.com.

What do you like about HCB?

When I talk about my world of dangerous goods, the listening population is miniscule. Yet, when I read HCB, I feel connected to the international reach of my business, my knowledge and my network. Being the only global magazine to report dangerous goods issues continuously, I use HCB as a basis for business opportunities... and great social conversation tales!

Company profile

Skolnik is a leading manufacturer of packaging for high value contents. Headquartered in Chicago, the company offers more than 400 combinations of steel containers (drums) ranging from 5 to 100 US gal (19 to 416 litres) in carbon and stainless steel. We specialize in fulfilling unique and critical customer requirements.

For a history of significant company events, our website has a picture gallery of nearly 100 years of Skolnik at www.skolnik.com/history.php.

Star product

Skolnik is known as the world leader for carbon and stainless steel salvage drums. The only salvage drums that meet the ‘T’ requirements of the United Nations, these drums are designed to quickly, easily and efficiently end a dangerous goods spill.

These drums are available to overpack anything from a 5-gallon pail to an 85-gallon drum. Fitted with either a bolt ring or quick lever closure, these drums are known worldwide as a staple of industry and transportation.

