



PERSERVERING IN PANDEMIC

MANUFACTURING • CAREFUL PLANNING AND UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO QUALITY KEPT SKOLNIK INDUSTRIES PRODUCTIVE AND INNOVATIVE IN A CHALLENGING YEAR

AS THE SUN rose on the new year and new decade, businesses and individuals around the globe dreamed of a bright future rife with opportunity – 2020 was going to be “their year”. Leadership at US steel drum maker Skolnik Industries started 2020 singing a similar tune. Despite the recession facing the industrial sector, the Chicago-based independent packaging manufacturer walked into the new year with momentum and a strong outlook.

Where Skolnik breaks from the pack is that it didn't lose that drive and positivity and was, ultimately, able to not only navigate the “unprecedented times” but to grow through it and again close out the year with strength and momentum.



SKOLNIK INDUSTRIES HAS KEPT ITS DOORS OPEN RIGHT THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

That is not to say that the manufacturer didn't experience the challenges of the last year. On the contrary, the Chicago neighbourhood Skolnik calls home had one of the two highest Covid-positive rates in the whole city. But Skolnik also has a long history of thriving in the face of a challenge – be it a unique packaging request, a disastrous fire taking down its facility or, yes, apparently even a global pandemic. From leadership to production line, the company prides itself on a ‘can-do’ attitude.

In an HCB feature from May 2015, then president and CEO and current chairman of the board, Howard Z Skolnik explained the niche and reputation Skolnik Industries had carved out for itself. “It was not our marketing strategy to create this market,” he said, “but it appears that, after speaking with other steel drum manufacturers, [...]

Skolnik is the ‘go-to’ company for matching challenges with solutions.”

In addition to this ‘can-do’ attitude, Skolnik has cultivated a reputation as a thought leader or resource in the packaging, transportation and dangerous goods industries, offering a steady stream of industry news and important information in its longstanding blogs and newsletters.

Approaching the chaos and crises of 2020 with the same can-do zeal and leadership its customers and competitors have come to know it for, Skolnik Industries transformed a year of uncertainty into one of opportunity and productivity.

PROACTIVITY, PLANNING, PROTECTION

Plans for 2020 were thrown out and America was thrown into reaction mode in the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak and subsequent shutdowns, which occurred in mid-March in the case of Chicago. Uniquely, however, Skolnik Industries never had to close its doors.

“We held our first Covid planning meeting in February,” Dean Ricker, president/CEO of Skolnik Industries, states plainly. “I had read an article by an epidemiologist and it really scared me – maybe I watched *Red Dawn* too many times as a child, but I thought ‘we have to take this seriously’. It spurred me to take action.”

Skolnik has always prioritised proactivity and open lines of communication, both with customers and with its entire team. “Early on, when not much was known about the virus, we erred on the side of caution and concern for our employees,” Ricker explains. The company strategised who could work from home, how to bolster its IT infrastructure, stocked up on cleaning supplies and implemented a split workday. By the time the White House declared a national emergency on 13 March 2020, Skolnik Industries was already working safely in smaller, distanced and masked numbers.

Naturally, Covid training for its employees became paramount. In regards to the high Covid rates in their facility’s zip code, Ricker explains: “A lot of our employees live in our neighbourhood. We were really faced with the fact that the government wasn’t educating

our employees on safety, so we needed to. We spent a lot of time and energy early on ensuring our team was educated and taking precautions seriously."

And it paid off. Skolnik has had uninterrupted production and supply throughout this entire crisis and reported zero at-work exposures to Covid-19 in 2020. Today, on the production line, everyone is back. "We still have alternating start, stop and lunch break times, but all of the Covid prevention practices we put into place have become second nature now," says Ricker. "We've rolled it into our safety practices: steel toed shoes, safety glasses, masks and social distancing."

GROWTH AND THE VIRUS

"Before last year," Ricker considers, "our goals were centred around growing the business, focusing on quality and consistency in the day-to-day operations of manufacturing and production. But then, all of a sudden, we had to become our own Dr Fauci. We had to strategise the day-to-day processes of operating in a pandemic. That became my number one job for several months."

Alongside the demand for a new operational strategy came an increased demand for specific and even new packaging.

The packaging industry is intertwined with so many other sectors of the economy and as such experienced a ripple effect as each industry contended with the impact of Covid-19. Where there was a decline in one industry, there was a pick up in another. "The demand for personal care related business - packaging for hand sanitisers, cleaning products, pharmaceutical related materials - blew up overnight," Ricker states. "And wine. Direct to consumer wine shipments broke all records in 2020," he adds.

For one particular growing market, Skolnik Industries expanded its product line to include a new size food and pharmaceutical-grade stainless steel container. "We now offer 3- and 5-gallon size stainless steel drums with 11¼-inch diameter for the extraction market," Ricker reports.

It is easy, Ricker explains, to forget how many different products and materials Skolnik Industries packaging touches, "why it is important that we always focus on producing quality packaging that is going to perform for our customers and get product safely from point A to point B."

The growth in pharmaceutical-related business has been particularly exciting and

meaningful for the Skolnik Industries team this year. "We have been producing a lot of stainless steel drums for ingredients being used for the vaccine," says Ricker. "We have an important job to do and it has been exciting for our employees to feel their role in the fight against the virus – it is something they are proud of."

CHANGES ON THE LINE

While Skolnik Industries was fortunate enough to stay in daily operation last year, it did not settle for just staying the course.

As a manufacturer of food and pharmaceutical-grade stainless steel drums, purity and sanitation has always been a priority on the Skolnik Industries production line. In response to the growth and challenges of last year it took things a step further: investing in a new sanitising system and dedicated stainless steel production line.

The new sanitising system uses high temperature and purified water and steam to clean and purify drum interiors for pharmaceutical customers. "As a result of the increased demand, we established a new, fully-dedicated production line for stainless steel drums," Ricker states. "This line went into production in August 2020 and has empowered us to confidently and efficiently serve and support the market."

The steel market and transportation industry have been extremely volatile for some time now and, if the last year has delivered one message, it is that the future is unpredictable. But when you helm a company with a reputation for facing challenges and embracing change like Skolnik Industries, thinking ahead is second nature.

"I think we're going to come out of this a lot stronger," says Ricker. "It's events like these that really test your will and I think we've learned a lot of valuable lessons. I'm proud of the Skolnik family - we've really been able to serve our customers throughout this challenging time, uninterrupted. I'm excited to see us continue to invest in our manufacturing operations, and I'm really looking forward to the day we can see our employees without masks and visit our customers again."

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