

-- Speaker 0 00:00:04 Make It Right. The Manufacturing Podcast,

Speaker 1 00:00:09 Willert Home Products is a family owned business that started out in 1946 with a single product moth balls. It now has almost a hundred products does business around the world and operates five plants with locations in st. Louis and Philadelphia and three in Asia. They employ approximately 500 people. Willard manufacturers, everything from flyswatters and pest control products to air freshener products. They also make the toilet bowl cleaner tidy bowl. Who's famous man in a boat commercials. I remember from when I was a kid, welcome to the Make It Right podcast. I'm Janet Eastman. And this week, my guest is Derek Winters. He's VP of Sales for Willert Home Products. And I'm excited to have you on the show Derek, cause I haven't very often spoken to a family owned business. That's been family owned for 75 years. So welcome to the show.

Speaker 0 00:00:58 Thanks Janet. It's really good to be here.

Speaker 1 00:01:01 So I think Willert is an interesting company simply because of its longevity as a family owned business. Can you give us a brief history lesson on how the company came to be and how it's grown?

Speaker 0 00:01:13 Yeah, no. I think that the histories are really kind of interesting a kind of foundation where mr. ADW Willert came back to the United States after serving in world war II. Since about 1946, he was working at Woolworth's Woolworth, uh, and the, he had a lot of customers coming in, you know, they're selling really nice garments, jackets, outerwear, and people kept having, you know, clothing damage from MOTS and other kinds of insects in their closet. So, you know, after sitting there for a couple of years, getting all these requests, he came up with the idea of make a product called the moth master, which was a, a hanging device that used a, uh, an airborne, uh, insect product to, to repel and get rid of insects within your closet. And that's basically how Willard was born in 1946.

Speaker 1 00:02:05 Wow. And so how long did they stick with that one product or before they started branching out?

Speaker 0 00:02:11 Uh, they started branching out, I'd say probably a couple of years afterwards. So they, they really got into closet care, so added fragrance at sense. Um, and then really started aggressively, uh, growing kind of that segment of clothing care and moth control into the fifties. So they acquire the <inaudible> brand, which is the number one brand from the board and chemical company in the, in the mid 1950s. And today, you know, as is probably the, the lion share of, of outdoor and indoor clothing production and insect control products flying and crawling.

Speaker 1 00:02:51 Okay. Okay. So the company is basically grown from making their own products and acquiring other products too. I said that they had approximately a hundred products, but is that correct? Yeah,

Speaker 0 00:03:03 Yeah, absolutely. So we're probably between 102 hundred unique skews and unique products that are, yeah, I would say over 95% made by us. There's a couple things that we don't do in terms of like aerosols, but, uh, everything else we're, we're a very vertically integrated manufacturing company.

Speaker 1 00:03:20 Okay. So that means that you handle stages, the manufacturing process then like rape from design and development of a product for, for those that are actually developed by the company right through to pushing it out the door to the consumer.

Speaker 0 00:03:37 Yeah. We, uh, we do basically everything except for a corrugated board. So we're even doing thermal form plastics. We're doing injection mold with, with uh, PETG, uh, HDPE plastic. So objection, uh, extrusion blow molding. And then on the chemical side, we're doing our own blending batching, um, continuous manufacturing at a chemical level and then final packaging. So we've got to the capabilities of, of doing anything from a private brand product, all the way to, you know, all of our national, uh, brands that are sort of assault wall worldwide. So

Speaker 1 00:04:15 Is that a unique approach? Like I don't, I mean, I talk to manufacturers all the time, but I'm not actually in manufacturing myself. I've never worked in a plant, but is, is that unique where you actually make the physical product and then do all the packaging and everything.

Speaker 0 00:04:32 So I think for k --

-- ind of the family owned nature and the size of our business, I think it's extremely unique. And I think it's a really, it's a Testament to the Willert family and all of our associates that we're able to do this where, you know, we, we sit on the shelves alongside some of these, you know, iconic, worldwide brands from Proctor and gamble on record Ben Keizer and some great, great companies that, you know, they make a lot of their own products, but they also outsource a lot where we've, uh, we've really found kind of our competitive advantages is to really, uh, make a lot of our own items and try to add value amongst the kind of the manufacturing process. So I do think we're fairly unique. I don't think a lot of the other companies are doing as much works with plastics as much work with chemicals and product development that we're doing today.

Speaker 1 00:05:22 So I'm sure that the company's mandate has changed over the years, but what do you believe is your key focus right now?

Speaker 0 00:05:30 Yeah, so our key focuses, so we've got, uh, in, in your intro, you did a great job summarizing. So we're, we're kind of the leaders in a closet insect control and also flying in co crawling insects. And that's a really important piece of the business. So we, we do that under the email's brand and then also another really, really kind of experienced legacy brand called reefer Galler that was historically sold in Bloomingdale's Macy's. And it's now in places like the container store and hardware stores. And then on our other side, uh, well it staying in closet. So to control insects in your closet, you can, you can do it numerous ways. Uh, you can use pest control products, but you also, uh, you know, eliminating odors and moisture is also a big, big help in terms of combating insect problems. So we have another brand that really focuses on odor and moisture control.

Speaker 0 00:06:23 It's called AirBoss. We do a great business with AirBoss amongst the hardware channel, uh, in kind of the specialty channel retail, which is a TJX TJ Maxx, Marshall's home goods amongst, uh, the United States and Canada to one piece of art. Our segment is really is driven towards insect control and closet care. Then the other portion of our businesses, all household cleaning, uh, mainly in toilet care and that's our tiny bowl brand bowl, fresh brands, and dr. Flush, those brands are really made for automatic toilet bowl cleaning. So the goal of those products are really to help families working families, save money and save time by just keeping automatic cleaning within their household going. So dropping tablets, putting liquid in the back of your toilet is really a nice InBetween cleaning and saves, you know, a lot of our hard working families, a lot of time and money. So that that's kind of how we go to market in those kind of two segments.

Speaker 1 00:07:19 So how did you actually decide that those were the two areas that you wanted to own?

Speaker 0 00:07:25 Yeah, it kind of came by, uh, you need to, he did that. He did a nice job touching on that, the history, and we started in the closet care with the moth master and mr. ADW Willard, uh, our current president and chairman right now, uh, bill Willard, AWU son, um, bill acquired a company from a publicly traded Japanese company, uh, many, many years ago. That was the leading, uh, automatic toilet bowl cleaning company. So think of blue tablets in the back of your toilet, right? And, uh, bill started the bull fresh brand and acquired this, this very, very large division of a Japanese company that we were able to start making products in the United States, that we were exporting to Japan due to the quality kind of a focus that we have. And we got into the, the automatic toilet bowl cleaning basically due to that acquisition, uh, from that kind of subsidiary of a Japanese company. And from there we've grown where, uh, in 2010 we acquired the tidy bowl brand, uh, from another large CPG American CPG company. And we've now we have the fastest, the two fastest growing automatic toilet bowl, clean brands, both fresh and tidy.

Speaker 1 00:08:36 So, so when, uh, Willard, the son, I'm sorry, what was his first name? Bill Weller. Oh, bill. Okay. So when bill Willard decided to go and acquire that company from Asia, was that something that was pretty unique to do at that time? Cause you say it was a number of years ago.

Speaker 0 00:08:57 Yeah, it --

-- was, it was a really interesting, uh, kind of segment. So it was another sense of publicly traded Japanese company that was also a family run. So we had a lot of commonalities in terms of, you know, family owned business multigenerational and, and one of the, the sons, nephews of the founders was basically sent to New York city from Tokyo to run this, this division and really take on the U S market. Well, when, when they arrived here at after many years of try this, he, they, they realized that the U S market is, is much different than Japan in terms of how the consumer behaves and all the, also the competitive landscape. So, uh, mr. Willard, bill Willard, our current chairman and president, uh, a friend of the family and over several years kind of worked out this, this acquisition where it allowed us to kind of take their us business and then supply them in Japan. And it's been a, probably about a 30 year relationship to this day.

Speaker 1 00:09:52 Huh. Wow. Okay. So, um, I want to talk about how you take costs out of the system, because I think based on a conversation that we had prior to the podcast here, um, you had said that you you'd like to do something called, um, disruptive value. So explain what that is and how you approach taking costs out of the system when you actually are making and producing your product.

Speaker 0 00:10:15 Yeah, no. So disrupted values is a term that many retailers have been kind of pushing, I'd say for the last five to 10 years, but in something that really fits our company well. So we do a good job in my opinion, that of going into a category that's dominated by really large companies that has, you know, price points that are, they're not inexpensive. And we try to make a product that has, you know, great quality that's available to the masses. So, uh, we believe by vertically integrating all of our manufacturing, we're able to take a really, really good product and make it much more affordable. So an example I'll use is, um, scrubbing bubbles has a great business in automatic toilet bowl cleaning, but to buy, uh, their equivalent size is almost 60 to 80% more than ours. So we believe that there's, there's a consumer that is looking for a great national brand product, but at a, uh, an opening level price point. And that's what we strive to achieve every day of winning customers and winning loyalty by, by supplying them something that's going to be, you know, uh, a substantially less priced, but has an equal quality.

Speaker 1 00:11:27 Okay. So, um, when you're up against a well known brand like that, how do you actually gain that, that customer loyalty to your brand and get them to actually buy your product? Do you know what I mean? Like, I mean, if everybody knows what scrubbing bubbles is, they go, well, I got to get that. How do you, how do you do sort of, yeah, go ahead. It's a question. And it's like

Speaker 0 00:11:54 One that we kick around a lot. So, you know, you go after, uh, when we're in with a big, big brand, um, you know, Clorox is a phenomenal brand in our category and the, and all these, uh, these companies do a great job of branding and marketing are big, uh, kind of component is when, you know, our, our core demographic shopper is, is, is, is a working mom. And when, when that mom comes to the shelf, if she sees a product, for example, that's \$5 and we have an equivalent in our mind product, that's \$3. We're totally trying to make that consumer make the shift at the shelf level. So we're trying to come with a package and in a, you know, kind of a consumer value standpoint, that's so far superior that it really makes that person try our product. And then hopefully we can gain that customer for life. And, and based on our, I'd say our last six, seven years of data, we've, we've done a good job of kind of converting customers to this, this, this style of approach and renewing.

Speaker 1 00:12:56 So that comes down to the actual, what is on the packaging of your products and you being able to get the, the appropriate shelf space in the store. So there's a lot of work involved in there for you to actually gain that customer.

Speaker 0 00:13:11 Yeah, no, there's a ton of work. And, uh, it is a lot of in house. We do utilize, uh, some really, really good package, uh, designers, whereas, you know, our, our packages are billboard and it's got a really jump out at a, at a, at a shopper and it's gotta resonate and commun --

-- icate to them and, you know, in seconds. So that's one expertise that we, we aren't, uh, aren't, you know, top of mind in, and we do outsource to some of the best, in my opinion, some of the best consumer packaged designers, uh, around the country and in North America. So we aren't totally vertically integrated. We do have an in house production department, but we do do some outsourcing in terms of design, because there are some fantastic designers out there that are much more skilled in communication. And in seconds on a package, then we are,

Speaker 1 00:14:05 Yeah, like you, you're the experts in the manufacturing and whatnot, but they're the experts in the design and, and the, the outer advertising side of things. That makes perfect sense. So you guys actually manufacture private label products for Walgreens and Walmart. Um, this must have been a, a really competitive bid to win. I know somebody in the fishing industry who actually, um, manufacturers fishing lures, and they sort of won this for Walmart, and they were able to make products for Walmart, like the private label brand. So how, how hard is it to get this?

Speaker 0 00:14:41 Yeah, so there's a, you're exactly right. So private label is very, very tough, but we work with, uh, several, uh, global, global retailers and US-based, um, and we, we do, you do have to be extremely competitive where we've shown value in private label is where we've partnered with the retailer on something that I would call, uh, it's more of a unique offering that still has a tremendous value that a private label, private label is supposed to offer, but it's kind of a unique value standpoint from an innovation standpoint. So for an example, we developed one with, uh, a national retailer. We utilize, uh, a really unique shape and activated charcoal gel to absorb odors in the closet. So they're the only, uh, retailer right now with a private label, a closet charcoal odor eliminator that uses a gel based formula. So the good thing for us is it allows us to invest in research and development, but also it doesn't, uh, kind of cannibalize the entire product line where it's just everybody battling over price, but the consumer still has a really, really good outcome on having a quality product at a great cost.

Speaker 1 00:15:56 That's, that's really smart because you're right. You're not cannibalizing your other products, right? That's yeah.

Speaker 0 00:16:03 They took it. It took us like 10 years to learn this. So we were the, we were in the down and dirty competitive bid company, and we still do that, but we've really thought about private label and two realms. How can we drive more shoppers to the, to the shelf with that retailer with something unique, and then also our other kind of private label, the left brain, right brain or the right branches saying we've got to produce at the very, very best price. And when the bed,

Speaker 1 00:16:29 How challenging is it to bring a new product to the market? And, you know, the other side of that to bring a new product to the market, but then also figure out the manufacturing process and set that up in your plants.

Speaker 0 00:16:43 It's really, really hard. And it's something that's not a, uh, it's, it's more of an art and a science. And just the science in our experience where, you know, we've won some products where I thought they were just going to be an absolute home run in terms of some, uh, owner and moisture control products. But it turned out that the market wasn't nearly what we thought it was and the price points couldn't support kind of the, the, the engineering of the products that we had. So one thing that the Willard family has done a really good job of is, as you mentioned, we have got multiple manufacturing sites, our sites in Asia, really, uh, we could do mass production there as well, but they do a really good job of what we call like a pilot R and D program. So we're, they're really, really good at making, you know, a hundred units, a thousand units to get a certain retailers, a test. So for example, there's some national retailers, we'll do a test on a clip strip in a hundred stores, and that'll really allow us to see like, Hey, does this item make sense in this package, at this price, with this artwork? And it kind of takes some risk out of the retailer and some risk out of full development for us. And we've really kind of pushed towards that kind of a pilot program.

Speak --

-- er 1 00:17:57 So you can actually test market things without it, like breaking the bank on you.

Speaker 0 00:18:02 Yeah. I mean, it's, it's something that's, don't get me wrong. We're not making any money on it, but it's not one of these, you got to spool up, buy all the equipment and hope it sells kind of, kind of processes. We're able to, you know, make several hundred of a, of an item and, and get some type of indication on if we think it's gonna work well or not.

Speaker 1 00:18:21 Right. And then can you just gradually ramp up as you see the market demand for it grow?

Speaker 0 00:18:26 Yeah, absolutely. So our flexibility in manufacturing really allows us to do that. So our pilot plants over in Asia can then either scale up or we can then scale up to the U S to eliminate lead times where we've got some very, very automated equipment and a great labor force that helps us kind of spool up rather quickly.

Speaker 1 00:18:45 <inaudible>. So what are you selling most of your products in North America? Are they global?

Speaker 0 00:18:50 Our products are global. So, um, we, we kind of treat our business as, as two parts. So, um, we do have an office in Shanghai. Our office in Shanghai really sells to Asia, uh, Australia. So they, they have their own sales and marketing arm there. And then, uh, our office in st. Louis mainly takes care of, of North America and South America. So we are a global company, but, uh, we've got, I'd say the majority of our business is still in North America right now, but we are growing globally.

Speaker 1 00:19:25 And when did you, I know that you, um, you purchased that other company some 30 years ago, that was based in Japan, but when did you actually get the plants in Asia?

Speaker 0 00:19:34 Uh, we, the, the, the Willert family, they, they moved to, uh, Brian Willard. Who's, who's now a third generation owner and operator, uh, the president of Willert, Shanghai, Brian, and his entire family, and moved over there with two small children, uh, about 15 years ago. And he opened up our own, you know, it's our own plant. We own the building, you know, and, uh, it's, it's a really interesting setup in terms of development and manufacturing. So we built our own factory from the ground up with Brian Willard and his family living in Shanghai for, for about 10 years.

Speaker 1 00:20:10 Wow, okay. That, that's cool.

Speaker 0 00:20:14 Yeah, we, we, uh, we take, uh, uh, laser shot approach in terms of development from a manufacturing standpoint, so, yeah.

Speaker 1 00:20:23 Hm. Okay. So a few years back, you say that, um, you bought tidy bowl and then you launched tidy bowl natural. Now I kind of curious about what are some of the challenges, manufacturing, natural products, and then how do you manufacture them in a plant? So they don't come into contact with other product ingredients that maybe can't be considered natural. Like what's the challenge there. Yeah.

Speaker 0 00:20:48 You know, the natural segment is a, is a totally, uh, it's got a whole host of other issues in terms of manufacturing that you brought up. So tiny bowl natural was launched. Uh, cause we saw a, kind of a, in our opinion, a consumer demand for natural products, but every natural product that we were seeing on the shelf was six, seven, \$8. You know, there was hardly anything under \$5 when we launched Heidi bowl, natural about six, seven years ago. So we partnered with, uh, Albertsons and Safeway, uh, several divisions amongst kind of the mountain West and the United States. So we looked at really good consumer demographic data showing where this kind of, where we thought this consumer demand was. And then we went out with, you know, products over three to \$5 retails. And, uh, it's, it's kind of been a really good evolution since you, you bring up a good, also a good point and a good question and how how's natural defiant and Howard, and is it hard to make natural?

Speaker 0 00:21:46 So when we started making natural products, the definition of natural and cleaning seven years ago is totally different than it was today. So previously you were okay using a different ingredients that were derivatives of natural, but now it's, it's much more stringent and we've actually had to kind of, uh, we didn't want to lose the efficacy of the current formulation. So we've, we've kind of transitioned our tiny little natural brain into tidy --

-- bowl, uh, botanical. So we're using, we're not a hundred percent natural. We're not claiming a hundred percent natural. So now we're botanical with, uh, we use a lot of really essential oils like tea, tree oil. Um, but it's really a it's demographic to be as close to natural as it can be, but it's not 100% natural based on today's definition of natural seven years ago, it would have been defined as natural, but you know, things have changed in how it's defined.

Speaker 1 00:22:39 Yeah. Well, and that is probably going to constantly evolve. Right. So yeah, if you're in the natural business, you're going to be constantly evolving to make sure your products stay in that category. That's, that's a challenge.

Speaker 0 00:22:53 Yeah. Kind of all, uh, it all started with the honest products and apps that last, where, you know, you've got a generational shift of, of what chemists and scientists and regulatory folks where, you know, if you talk to somebody who might be, uh, not trying to age bracket anybody, but if you talk to a scientist or many scientists that might be have, you know, a longer tenure, they have a different opinion of ingredients like SLS and, you know, then maybe a 35 year old scientist. And that's just, it's a subjective thing based on data points. But it's a really interesting, kind of a meshing of generations of, of, uh, of workers right now. So we kind of got crossed in between. So we made the pivot and said, Hey, we don't really, our consumers care about natural, but they don't care about being a hundred percent natural. They want a product that's affordable. That works in that is mainly natural. And that's where we shifted to tidy bowl botanical. And it's, it's one of the top brands in kind of the specialty channel, which is TJ Maxx, Marshall's Ross home goods. Hmm.

Speaker 1 00:24:00 I have to ask this question because we are in the time of COVID, but, um, was there any thought at any time coming up with hand sanitizers and anything like that for your product lines?

Speaker 0 00:24:13 Yeah, we, uh, we, we are the hand sanitizer business. Our facility in Philadelphia had a, uh, uh, United States FDA approval and we actually made hand sanitizer in the eighties and in this facility. So we basically just renewed our license and we started, uh, supplying, uh, mainly local and regional grocery stores and hardware stores. Cool. So

Speaker 1 00:24:40 With the, with COVID, let's, let's go beyond that. Have you seen your business shift or change at all in the last, say eight months with COVID are more people focused on cleaning and cleanliness? Like have you noticed that in your budget?

Speaker 0 00:24:55 Yeah, it was a, it's a great question. And there's, there's kind of the pragmatic answer and then kind of the philosophical answer and the pragmatic answer is yes, the awareness and cleaning just shot up. And then, uh, you know, we, we sell most of our core businesses in is in bathroom and toilet care. So as soon as the work from home thing kind of started, it's as simple as there's more people in their house flush their toilets, and you've got a lot more dirty toilets in your house. So our cleaning products and demand, you know, we're, we're seeing anywhere from two to three times demand in certain retailers and, you know, being a family owned vertically integrated manufacturing company, we've never shorted an order. We fulfilled every single customer in full, and that's something that we're really proud of and continue to do so today,

Speaker 1 00:25:46 Derek, I think I could probably talk to you for hours about this company, but, um, I'm going to have to let you go, you, I'm sure you've got other things you want to get done today, but I think, um, the Willert Home Products story is a fascinating one and I wish you continued success. And I do hope that we have a chance to talk to you again in the very near future. I think it's a really great story. Congratulations on the business.

Speaker 0 00:26:07 No thanks. You had, I really appreciate you having us on, and we're really thankful for all of our retail customers and all of our consumers, and we appreciate you having us on thank you again.

Speaker 1 00:26:17 It's my pleasure. Derek Winters is VP of Sales for Willert Home Products. And that is our show. This week, you can check out our Twitter and LinkedIn feeds that are on our podcast page and subscribe and share the podcast with your f --

-- riends and colleagues. If you like through iTunes, Google play Stitcher, Spotify, and YouTube and make it right. Podcast is brought to you by Kevin Snook, a leadership advisor and author of the bestselling book. Make It Right. Five steps to align your manufacturing business from the front line to the bottom line

Speaker 2 00:26:44 Until next time. Thanks for listening to the Make It Right podcast.

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