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Boca company pivots to meet PPE needs

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BOCA RATON – The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented demand for personal protective equipment, known as PPE, and Boca Raton-based Tiger Packaging is on the front lines of helping to fill the need for masks, gloves, sanitizing gels and more.

Peter Horwitz, its founder and chief executive, launched the import company focused on providing plastic and paper packaging and disposable goods to the food service and janitorial-sanitation industries in 2013.

“When COVID hit, I was fortunate enough to have had several relationships with people in Asia who were already doing safety products, which encompasses PPE products as well,” Horwitz said. “We have an office in Shanghai, China. Pretty quickly I was able to get my people in the Shanghai office to go and speak with our existing suppliers and see which ones would be able to help us secure additional PPE items.

“A big chunk of that was masks. That was the big initial need for product. That is how we really, really pivoted, and were able to do that quickly into PPE,” said Horwitz, 66.

See PPE, Page 3B



Tiger Packaging employees include Jordan Wong, left, Terresa Ocello, Alan Yao, Chief Executive Peter Horwitz, Anat Schwartz and Fabi Montoya at the company's Boca Raton headquarters. The import company has shifted gears lately. HANDOUT PHOTO

palmbeachpost.com | MONDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2020 | 3B

PPE

Continued from Page 1B

During the first couple of months of the pandemic, Tiger sold 5 to 6 million masks a month, but that has slowed as production has increased and masks have been stockpiled by restaurants, hospitals and others. The company has always procured masks as well as gowns, bouffant caps, bear caps and other products for the restaurant industry, but not in the volume it has since COVID erupted.

Now there's a global shortage of single-use disposable gloves that is expected to persist through 2021.

Horwitz, originally from South Africa, moved to Boca Raton in 1994 with his wife and two children seeking a more secure and stable environment. In South Africa he worked in distribution and packaging, and for 10 years owned several restaurants, including the world's second Hard Rock Café. It opened in Cape Town in the 1980s after the first one in London.

He worked for a Pompano Beach-based plastic bag manufacturer now known as ISOflex for 19 years before opening his own company.

“My business Tiger Packaging has allowed me to venture into imports of various products, both within packaging and within food service, health care, building maintenance and janitorial supply,” Horwitz said.

In 2019, Tiger typically procured 10 to 15 million single-use gloves per month, and that has soared to 60 to 70 million gloves per month to customers primarily in the U.S., but also in Canada and the Caribbean, Horwitz said. They are shipped in containers holding 3.5 million gloves.

“We have had some supply issues, particularly in the field of gloves, which has become the new hot item, both nitrile and vinyl gloves,” Horwitz said.



Tiger Packaging CEO Peter Horwitz says gloves have “become the new hot item.” HANDOUT PHOTO

“Nitrile gloves are higher quality vinyl gloves used a lot in the medical industry, but they are also used in several non-medical industries which require high-grade product than what the typical vinyl glove is. Vinyl gloves are very popular in food service. They are less expensive.

“Health care cannot operate without gloves. We have been fortunate in that we have found some alternative types made from slightly different materials, a thermo-polymer elastomer that is a vinyl glove made from PVC,” he said.

Vinyl gloves predominantly are made in China, but nitrile gloves are manufactured in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

As Tiger — a sourcing, logistics and fulfillment company — sought additional PPE suppliers, it encountered numerous dishonest and underhanded factories in China and other Asian countries seeking to capitalize on the demand.

“A lot of these factories are overselling and requiring payment up front, and then the customer is waiting and waiting and waiting,” Horwitz said. “It is months, and in some cases, you do not

get the product at all. We have been lucky. We have had delays and dealt with some factories who were not honest. We got our monies back.

“It has been a very difficult time for us and our customers. Our customer relies on our integrity. We are the company of record and pride ourselves in doing the right thing.”

Because of the problems, Tiger employees inspect factories to make sure the plants exist and have the production capacity. The company also has changed the way it does business on the PPE imports. Instead of wiring the money up front, it now releases funds only after the factory ships.

“It is at times like this that you get the weeds coming out of the green grass, taking advantage,” Horwitz said. “A lot of them are secondary small factories struggling to make a living and recognizing an opportunity to do something different without any thought to the future. It is all for today and nothing for tomorrow.”

Tiger's eight employees at its offices in Boca Raton, Denver and Shanghai have worked as many as 15 to 20 hours a day to handle the new business, along

with continuing to supply the longer-term customers. As a logistics and distribution firm, it works through a national group of sales brokers who sell to wholesalers.

Instead of traveling to Asia at least twice a year, Horwitz is on Zoom calls every day.

“Fortunately, our restaurant-supply business has continued,” Horwitz said. “The numbers are not quite as good as they were. Some of our customers have declined very badly. We sell to the cinema industry. As we all know, the cinema industry has really suffered.”

Tiger sells containers, cups and other disposable items — including eco-friendly trays made from sugar-cane residue and paper straws — to take-out and quick service restaurants. Some of those have seen significant growth this year, while many sit-down restaurants have closed or experienced a decline.

As for the outlook on the pandemic, Horwitz said that while there are reports saying it will worsen this winter and others saying it will not, he says he thinks it isn't going away anytime soon.

“Whatever supply conditions we have will continue. The other area Tiger has been very successful with is selling hand sanitizers, wipes and disinfectant wipes,” Horwitz said. “It's something we never did before.”

The company became a listed U.S. Food and Drug Administration manufacturer and is registered with the Environmental Protection Agency.

“We partnered with several factories, both in the U.S. and in Asia to manufacture products under license for us, under our own label,” Horwitz said. “There is a huge shortage of disinfecting wipes. I really feel that is going to continue through the summer of next year.

“Our business has grown. We were smart enough to pivot and find meaningful products to supply our existing customer base. Our customers have grown. If they grow, we grow with them.”

