

A

bright spot in Appanoose County's manufacturing sector has been Barker Company, Ltd., a Keosauqua-based maker of standard, specialty and fresh-food display merchandisers.

It was on the heels of the news that Rubbermaid would be leaving, that Barker first announced in July 2006 that it would be adding an additional 100,000 square-foot facility to its existing 300,000 square-foot factory in Centerville. The estimated cost was \$4 million.

"During the spring of this year, we introduced a new line of spherically-curved specialty display cases. The market's reaction to this new line has been strong, stated Barker President, Pat McMahon at the time. "In addition, our customer base has been very aggressive in building new retail stores and remodeling existing stores in order to better compete for customers. As a result, we needed to purchase an existing facility to increase our capacity immediately."

Barker purchased and moved into the former Young Radiator plant for the expansion. Plans called for selling the original facility.

Then in November 2007, the company again announced another expansion at its Centerville site - an additional 50,000 square-foot facility and the addition of 140 employees. The new manufacturing area will be in the building it had planned to sell. With the 140 additional employees expected with this newest facility, Barker's employment level will have almost doubled in the course of three years.

"The new \$7 million facility is expected to open in the spring of 2008," read the Barker press release. "Barker will utilize state of the art mill working, paint and sheet metal equipment to assist in the expansion of the company's custom food bar and wood working business segments. The new facility will more than double the company's production capacity for those products."

Dick Dietzman, the Centerville plant manager, said the woodworking part of the manufacturing will be in the former Barker plant since it requires different equipment than metal working - and the wood dust would interfere with metal work.

In the past, said Dietzman, the company had outsourced much of its cafeteria counter orders - but would now be able to handle it all in-house with the expansion.

The Barker Company has successfully taken advantage of the increase demand for food display equipment.

"Barker Company began in 1982 when Jack McMahon purchased the refrigeration division of Barker Products Corporation," reads the company's Web page. "He and nine other employees began manufacturing pizza and egg display cases for the supermarket industry. Four months later, eldest son Pat joined the team as the tenth

employee.

"The company quickly found a market niche by designing custom equipment to meet each customer's special needs. As sales rose, we added more employees including brothers, Mike, Tim and Tom McMahon."

With the 140 new employees in Centerville, the total work force here and in Keosauqua will total almost 800 employees.

You don't stay ahead of the game by being passive. Dietzman says their Research and Development Department is constantly assessing new technologies and products for the next generation of food display equipment.

He noted that when he began in the business about 15 years ago, poly (polymethyl methacrylate) counter tops were in demand. Polymethyl methacrylate surfacing was marketed as "synthetic marble."

Corin became the next favorite surfacing material after its price was brought down by Dupont.

Dietzman says granite is now in great demand and he expects to see a new Dupont material gaining more of the market - Zodiaq quartz. The nonporous, solid countertop is 93 percent quartz and 7 percent colorant and resin. He says one advantage of it over granite is that it does not crack as easily.



**Dick Dietzman, manager of the Barker Company's Centerville plant.**

at convenience stores - needing new types of food display equipment. There are also more hot foods being served at salad bars.

And take gelato, says Dietzman, which is an Italian type of ice cream that is now a fad on the West Coast. It needs to be kept at a lower temperature than American ice cream - therefore a different kind of food display will be needed.

It's these changes in style and technology that prompt many big stores to continually remodel. Dietzman says this has made manufacturing less seasonal. When the equipment demand was more for new stores, the orders dropped during the construction off-seasons - which could mean layoffs in the winter. With the demand more level throughout the year, layoffs are now usually voluntary at Barker.

But a major factor behind the Barker success in a highly competitive field is that it specializes in customizing cases for its customer. While other companies may offer a large line of merchandise, they come in standard sizes and shapes. Need a freezer unit with a radius front, 7 feet high and 10 feet long? The Iowa manufacturer will design (using computer graphics) and build it.

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**By Dan Ehl  
Managing Editor**

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"Induction works according to a simple basic principle, states a Diva de Provence Web site article. "An electronic circuit supplies power and electronically controls an inductor coil inside the cooktop. This coil generates a magnetic field when cookware is placed in contact with the cooktop surface, causing induced currents to flow through the base of the cookware. These currents transform the cookware into a heat source by what is called the joule effect, leaving the surface of the cooktop surrounding the cookware cool to the touch."

The merchandise itself is constantly changing. He noted that at first refrigerated unites were needed to sell frozen pizzas. As eating habits continued to change, people were soon buying individual slices of hot pizza

