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Warwick's AquaMotion: Thriving manufacturer loves being in hot water

By Frank Prosnitz Special to the Journal
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WARWICK — It would be an understatement to suggest that Hans Kuster is a patient man. After all, it took well over a decade of research, experimentation and testing for him to bring his company's recirculation products to market.

And when he did, his AquaMotion was recognized for its innovation, fulfilling its commitment to produce high-quality, innovative products in a highly competitive market.

AquaMotion's specialty: Systems that supply nearly instant hot water and save thousands of gallons that would otherwise go down the drain while consumers wait for hot water to arrive at the tap.

To Gov. Gina Raimondo, AquaMotion shows the spirit and independence that she hopes will help revitalize Rhode Island's manufacturing industry.

On a visit to the company this spring, she told Kuster that his company's commitment to the state and its economy reflects "the independent spirit of innovation that has fueled Rhode Island for centuries."

AquaMotion is the kind of company that the governor and others hope will help restore at least a semblance of the once-robust manufacturing base in Rhode Island. It's a sector that traces its roots to Samuel Slater and his mill in Pawtucket, a field that once employed more than 130,000 in Rhode Island. Today, it encompasses a workforce about a third that size. Manufacturing, as a result of technological advancements, is far less labor-intensive than it was half a century ago.

Kuster, AquaMotion's president, employs about a dozen people in a company that brought its first product to market in November 2013 after more than a decade of research and testing.

According to company literature, AquaMotion produces some 200 different energy-efficient pumps for heating and plumbing.

Earlier this year, the company's Aqua-Flash Recirculation was recognized as the most innovative plumbing product at the International Air-Conditioning, Heating, Refrigerating Exposition (AHR Expo) in Chicago.

It's an award you can't miss when you visit AquaMotion's facility at 88C Jefferson Blvd. in Warwick. The award sits in the entryway to the building, into which the company moved in 2013.

This is the new manufacturing: technologically-driven companies whose products are produced in clean environments by fewer employees with higher skills.

AquaMotion's products are the best on the market, Kuster says, devices that provide comfort and savings and help the environment.

"All the benefits of hot-water comfort and saving the world," he said. "We need [water] for agriculture, rather than letting it go down the drain."

The company's systems, Kuster says, conserve some 12,000 to 15,000 gallons of water a year for a home with four or five taps. "Waiting 30 seconds, one or two minutes for hot water in the shower or at a faucet is costly," he said. "Homeowners save on their water bill, utility bills and sewage fees" while accessing "virtually instant hot water comfort to every tap."

Kuster, who was born in Switzerland three years before the outbreak of World War II, says he's committed to developing American-made products.

His products are designed and built in America, he says, and when he purchases components he seeks bids from companies in the United States and overseas; some of the components come from overseas.

Kuster opened AquaMotion after a successful 17-year run at another company he started, Sparco, which he sold 18 years ago to Honeywell. Sparco was also in Warwick, producing heating zone valves and related products.

And before that, he worked for 21 years at Taco, now a competitor, where he worked as a senior vice president overseeing various departments.

"You have to pay your dues," he said. "I learned everything while I was there."

Kuster would disclose neither his company's revenues nor the volume of products it produces, noting that as a private company, he does not need to reveal either.

But he did say the company is growing rapidly. "We're on a tremendous curve right now, 100 percent ahead of last year."

Sitting at a conference table on the second floor of his facility, overlooking the manufacturing floor, Kuster reflects on what has made him successful, the values embraced by the company and advice to young entrepreneurs.

It begins, perhaps, with a formidable team. "We have a wonderful team of competent, committed people," he said.

It's also about resources.

"Fifty to 60 percent of companies go bankrupt in their first year. They run out of money. They don't have the leadership experience. You need to know all aspects of the industry you are in — competition, products, manufacturing, finance and sales. You need to know the whole package.

"Basically, it's working hard and being totally committed," he said. "If you have the resources and desire to make better products, you'll succeed over time."