

Business Times

'A business is about people'

Beckett keeps Chrystac's flywheel spinning

IN MOTION Bill Beckett plans to make acquisitions to grow Chrystac.

BY STEVE JAGLER, of SBT

As William "Bill" Beckett sees it, God has a way of putting him in the right place and connecting him with the right people at just the right time.

In 1968, just one day before the United States launched its doomed Tet Offensive in Vietnam, Beckett was "running convoys" for a logistical supply unit of the US Army. Beckett, a Milwaukee native, ran into a soldier who was a fellow Wisconsin native. The soldier offered to switch Beckett to a new assignment. Beckett accepted the new post.

Good thing.



"The unit I was with was shelled. It was as if God was moving me out of harm's way, moving me in the right direction," Beckett recalls. "I met the last living officer from that unit. That's where I was supposed to go. And it was a guy from Wisconsin that saved my butt."

Thirty-five years later, Beckett is saving some butts on his own. He is the president and chief executive officer of Chrystalis Packaging & Assembly Corp. (Chrystac), a Milwaukee company that is on the verge of remarkable growth.

Beckett plans to make several acquisitions of other companies and plans to move from his firm's 22,000 square feet of space in a warehouse on Milwaukee's south side to a much larger and newer location.

"What I have to do is get big. I've got to go and buy companies. I've got to be the transaction maker for this company," Beckett says.

Chrystac is no longer flying under the radar screen in the packaging and assembly industry. When Beckett acquired the former Out-

source Packaging & Assembly Corp. in 2001 and changed its name to Chrystac, the company had about \$400,000 in annual revenues. By the end of 2001, it had grown to \$800,000, and it blossomed to \$1.9 million in 2002.

And counting.

“Five different companies have offered to purchase our company, including two in the last two weeks,” Beckett says. “Even though we’re small, the financials are solid. Everything is paid for. But I’d rather be more proactive and acquire companies, than sit back and wait to be bought. I feel that flywheel turning. I think we’re seeing some momentum there. It still needs a lot of energy behind it, but it’s going forward.”

Beckett is a firm believer that to grow, a company needs to be flexible. In fact, he even changed his business model from being a startup company to acquiring an existing firm. That change was made, even though it resulted in him not being able to cash in on a \$100,000 loan from the Milwaukee Economic Development Corp. and a \$100,000 loan from the Wisconsin Department of Commerce, because his company was no longer considered a startup firm.

Yet, Beckett is modifying his business model again to go into acquisition mode to build capacity and procure larger packaging contracts with corporations that produce consumer goods, including food products.

Throughout the changes, Beckett says he has been blessed to have the right people on his “bus.” In the front seats of that bus are production supervisor Jose Rodriguez and production coordinator Bryan Bockmann.

“First who? Both of them are very, very talented people. We have a largely Hispanic workforce, and Jose understands the culture. He’s bilingual and one of the best people managers I have ever worked with. And he’s well compensated for it,” Beckett says. “Brian’s the same way. He’s very meticulous and well organized.”

Chrystac’s quality assurance technician Laura Diaz and office manager Diana Marquez also play key roles at the firm, Beckett says.

The core team of players has helped the company generate a 27% rate of return for the firm’s seven private shareholders.

“And that’s cash,” Beckett says. “We’ve blown the socks out of every project that we’ve done.”

Chrystac’s customers have included Delphi Automotive, Strattec Security Corp., Serigraph Inc., A.L. Schutzman Co., Evco Plastics, Intermet, Badger Truck Center and JRS Distribution.

Chrystac hopes to gain additional lever-

“We’re a company with both a business and a social objective. This is something I’ve thought about doing for 25 years,” Beckett says.

While reflecting on his workforce, Beckett’s sees history repeating itself in some ways.

“As an African-American, it’s interesting to me. I see the Asians and the Hispanics today, and they remind me very much of the Italians and the German immigrants to this country early in the last century,” Beckett says. “They work hard, and they have a dream. They’re not afraid to hold down three jobs to get it done, if that’s what it takes. And yet they are deeply rooted in their native cultures and languages.”

Beckett says many manufacturers in south-

eastern Wisconsin fell victim to the lure of the suburbs, yet they regret it today because they moved too far away from their available workforce and are now bearing the costs of recruiting and transporting employees from the inner city.

“It’s like the US tank commanders that outran their supply lines in the Iraq War,” Beckett says. “Wherever our new plant is, it’s got to be convenient for our workers. This company is driven by the caliber of the people here. We do team-building, supervisory training and even offer English-as-a-second-language courses here. A business is about people.”

PROFILE OF A LEADER

William “Bill” Beckett

President and CEO, Chrystalis Packaging & Assembly Corp., Milwaukee

AGE: 59

EDUCATION: Bachelor’s degree in sociology and master’s degree in urban studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; graduated from the Minority Business Executive Program of the Amos Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College.

COMPANY’S ANNUAL REVENUES: \$1.9 million

EMPLOYEES: 75 (at peak production)

ROLE MODEL: Bob Johnson, CEO of BET (Black Entertainment Television), and the late Reggie Lewis, former CEO of Beatrice International.

LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY: “It’s the vision. I have the vision. Then my managers, my employees ... They have the solutions. They understand where this is going, and they keep it on track. They keep me on track, too.”

age for landing larger contracts by forming a joint venture with a Chicago company soon and by gaining its ISO 9000-2001 quality assurance certification early next year.

Beckett hasn’t hesitated to invest in accelerating his technology. Last year, he purchased another shrink-wrapping machine. That investment enabled him to boost production by 30% in one shift, allowing him to eliminate his second shift, thereby saving substantial costs.

Ultimately, Beckett doesn’t know where the growth will lead him to relocate his plant. However, don’t expect him to set up shop in a cushy office park in the plush suburbs.

William “Bill” Beckett has quite an impressive resume.

- ▶ President and CEO of Chrystalis Packaging & Assembly Corp. (Chrystac)
- ▶ Serves as director of SelectStaff Services Inc.
- ▶ Serves on the credit committee of the Milwaukee Economic Development Corp.
- ▶ Chairman of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Board of Visitors.
- ▶ Managed Future Value Ventures Inc., a venture capital fund.
- ▶ Served as economic development manager for Wisconsin Power & Light Co.
- ▶ Served as executive director of minority business development for the Wisconsin Department of Development.
- ▶ Worked as assistant branch manager for Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco.
- ▶ Served as associate director for program planning and development for the Bay Area Urban League in San Francisco.
- ▶ Served as 1st lieutenant in the US Army Adjutant General’s Corps in Vietnam, 1967-1969.
- ▶ Earned bachelor’s degree in sociology and master’s degree in urban studies at UWM.
- ▶ Graduated from the Minority Business Executive Program of the Amos Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College.