



BUSTLING BOX BUSINESS

Cinnaminson company ships versatile containers

By EILEEN SMITH
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CINNAMINSON — The huge steel shipping containers made at Sea Box Inc. are big enough to hold thousands of computers, showers for sweaty soldiers or an apartment for a homeless family of six.

"People are always coming up with clever ideas for things to do with containers," says CEO James Brennan Jr. "It's our job to figure out how to make it work."

The bustling Sea Box plant turns out containers that serve as transmission stations for NASA, bike jumps for recreation centers and X-ray booths that detect bombs at military bases.

"You walk through the box, like those see-through stations at the airport," says Brennan, who lives in



Jim Brennan, chief executive officer of Sea Box, stands near one of his new experimental housing units at the company's Cinnaminson plant on Monday. Welder Jose Dominguez (top) works on a container. JOHN ZIOMEK/COURIER-POST

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Moorestown.

With 2010 sales of \$105 million, Sea Box is growing. In the past 60 days, the company has added 20 workers to the payroll, for a total of 190.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have kept the business busy for years. Even after U.S. troops withdraw from Iraq, Brennan says the military will still need a steady stream of containers.

Still, he has been intent on diversifying Sea Box, rolling out modular housing for disaster zones, including Haiti, and such innovations as mega-movie screens for Disney.

"I have to touch everything," he says.

Tall and stocky, Brennan strides through the plant, past designers toggling between a trio of computer screens to make drawings and design specs. On the factory floor, he peers into a container that will be stacked, floor to ceiling, with gun racks.

Some containers — essentially, basic steel boxes — are made in China. Their sophisticated innards are engineered and installed in the United States.

"If we made everything in the U.S. from scratch, we couldn't be competitive," he says. "We have learned we are the best at inventing things, but China does a good job making things."

Brennan studied mechanical engineering for two years at Penn State. He dropped out and went to work in marketing and operations for a tractor trailer company.

He learned a lot but the job didn't last. In 1983, in an economy nearly as chilly as the current climate, Brennan was out of work

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JIM BRENNAN Sea Box chief executive officer

and having no luck finding a new position.

"My unemployment was running out so I decided to go into business for myself," he recalls.

He bought a used cargo container and sold it. He didn't make money the first year. But the business kept growing and he started hiring people, a few at a time.

In 1995, the company jump-started expansion with a \$475,000 loan from Royal American Bank backed by the Small Business Association, repaying the money within five years.

Recently, Sea Box was named to the SBA 100, an honor reserved for 100 small businesses who have created at least 100 jobs since receiving SBA help.

"Jim Brennan's innovation, his attention to detail and his willingness to customize his products are what gives Sea Box a competitive edge in today's marketplace," says Alfred J. Titone, SBA's New Jersey district director. "Sea Box is living proof that a small business can succeed by carving out a niche market and producing quality products right here in the United States."

Rep. Jon Runyan, R-N.J., visited the plant Wednesday to inspect a new spinoff, a pair of boxes that can be joined together to make a 960-square-foot, three bedroom apartment.

Sea Box's design, which can be stacked to form a four-story building, was the winning idea in a competition for interim hous-

ing by New York City's department of emergency management.

"If New York is flooded by a hurricane, we can supply completely furnished homes for 300,000 people, including dishes and towels," Brennan says.

In 2009, Sea Box was awash in business and bursting at the seams at its 30,000-square-foot plant off River Road. Brennan started shopping for larger space among the darkened factories of Cinnaminson, Delanco and Pennsauken.

He liked the 400,000-square-foot plant shuttered by AFG Glass on Union Landing Road in the East Riverton section of the township. But the space was too big — and the \$12 million price tag was too high.

"Then we got bigger and the price got smaller, so it turned out OK," he says.

Sea Box bought the plant for \$4.7 million and pumped another \$4 million into renovations, including five acres of rooftop solar panels. Brennan's wife, Maureen, decorated the building, which includes such employee amenities as a bistro-like cafeteria and restrooms with granite counter tops.

"My wife wants this to be a beautiful place for people to work," he says.

Doing right by employees is an integral part of the corporate culture at Sea Box. Workers can expect annual raises in good times and bad.

There are company fishing trips, a picnic each

summer and a winter holiday bash. Money raised from collecting scrap metal goes into a pizza fund.

"It's the people who make this business," Brennan says. "Without their hard work, we wouldn't be here."

Sea Box benefits from a workforce that is both creative and efficient, says Philip Kirschner, president of the New Jersey Business and Industry Association, a Trenton-based trade group.

"They have exceptional engineering and skilled labor that has a high level of productivity," he says. "They are very innovative, applying advanced technology to a relatively simple product."

Sea Box also acquired The Inventors Shop, a 40-year-old precision machining and manufacturing facility adjacent to the plant. Inventing is a passion for Brennan, who holds more than 100 patents.

As a boy growing up in Bucks County, he shared a bedroom with his brother. He rigged fishing line and a rotisserie from a barbecue grill to invent a chessboard that would descend from the ceiling and hover over their beds.

"After my brother and I were done playing, the chessboard went back up to the ceiling," he says.

Inside the cavernous manufacturing facility, the ideas keep coming. Supervisors ride bicycles between work areas to keep track of progress on boxes that range from a pop-up shower and latrine for soldiers on maneuvers to a compact cottage for miners in the Australian outback.

"Thankfully, there is no end to what you can do with a box," Brennan says.

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