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New AirBoss COO will head compounding unit

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PAUL REID, HOTHOUSE CREATIVE FOR AIRBOSS
Chris Bitsakakis

NEWMARKET, Ontario—Chris Bitsakakis has long been fascinated by the science behind making a high quality and consistent batch of rubber.

That's one of the many reasons he accepted the positions of chief operating officer of AirBoss of America Corp. and president of the company's Rubber Solutions division. He was named to the top posts at the compounder and rubber product maker in November.

"Rubber compounding gets into your blood," Bitsakakis said in a recent interview. "The perfect harmony required between formulation, process and equipment to make a batch of rubber that performs consistently day after day was always very exciting to me."

Of course it took more than the desire to be connected to rubber mixing and the production of rubber goods to draw him to Newmarket-based AirBoss, which operates seven plants in Canada and the U.S. and has a work force of about 1,100.

Bitsakakis was equally impressed with the company's top officials' determination and dedication to sustain growth and expand.

"In many hours of extended discussions with Glen Schoch (chairman and CEO of the firm)," he said, "I realized that his vision and drive to grow this company into something very special was something I could really enjoy being part of.

"I also spent some time with (President) Lisa Swartzman and the rest of the AirBoss management team and felt that this was a very talented group of professionals that I could work well with to accomplish the goals of the corporation."

Good fit with AirBoss

In making the announcement that Bitsakakis had been selected as the new AirBoss COO and Rubber Solutions division president, Schoch noted that Bitsakakis is well-seasoned in the field with more than 25 years of experience, primarily in the manufacturing arena. The majority of that time was spent with rubber-based businesses and automotive parts suppliers.

With an extensive background in implementing lean manufacturing programs and streamlining and expanding plants globally, Bitsakakis has a strong track record of improving operational efficiencies and performance, according to Schoch.

As COO, Bitsakakis will have "overall responsibility for all operations of the business, including identifying and implementing new growth opportunities both organically and through strategic initiatives," Schoch said.

In his position as president of Rubber Solutions, the compounding and industrial products arm of the company, "Chris will play an integral role in solidifying and growing our position as leader in rubber solutions for our customers," the chairman and CEO added.

Remaining close to the firm's core business "will allow me to have more direct influence on the accelerated growth plans of the compounding and industrial products division," said Bitsakakis, who has been involved in the industry since 1990.

After graduating from college on a Thursday in 1990, he began working for Standard Products Co. the following Monday. He was hired by Ted Zampetis, the global president of Standard Products, who Bitsakakis said eventually became a close mentor "and taught me in business to always do more than you have to do in order to succeed."

He remained at Standard Products for 11 years, starting in a continuous improvement role and working his way through plant supervision before being named to his first senior management position as plant superintendent at a factory in Georgetown, Ontario. "In that role, I was laser-focused on reducing scrap and improving efficiencies," Bitsakakis said.

Because of those priorities, he became very vocal and demanding, constantly pushing for higher quality products from a sister plant that handled all of the firm's rubber compounding.

After four years, Standard Products' Canadian president got tired of his constant complaining about the rubber compounds, Bitsakakis admitted with a smile, and suggested that if he was so smart then he should go and run the compounding division.

Bitsakakis did just that.

"I took over a very old mixing plant that used old technology and hadn't been updated in many years," he said. Working with an experienced team at the facility, he helped convert the turn of the century plant into a world-class mixing facility.

At the same time he worked with a technical team to build a new state-of-the-art mixing facility located a short distance from the original compounding site. "It is this experience that endeared me to the science of mixing the perfect compound," according to Bitsakakis.

He left Standard Products about a year after Cooper Tire merged with the firm and spent 10 years with Magna International running the company's rubber extrusion business and helping to expand its rubber and thermoplastic sealing business.

After leaving Magna, he headed up the plastic window extrusion operation for Royal Plastics before it was sold. Bitsakakis most recently worked in the aerospace field running the Canadian division of PCC, a subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway.

Strong talent base

Bitsakakis views AirBoss as a company with "both an amazing asset base and some incredible people poised to help me and the senior leadership ... create and execute a strategy of accelerated growth and prosperity for many years to come.

"Having toured the plants before my agreement to join AirBoss, I was already quite impressed with the level of technological advancement that has been applied in all aspects of our business. The compounding technology, molding technology and defense products were all big selling points in my decision to join the company. Having said that, I was most pleased with the level of talent we have throughout all levels of our organization."

He said he has always believed that a physical asset base is what makes products but it's the people and culture that breed success.

AirBoss recently reorganized its Rubber Solutions operation, Bitsakakis said, because the firm's individual and distinct compounding centers in Acton Vale, Quebec; Kitchener, Ontario; and Scotland Neck, N.C., had been operating independently of one another. He noted that the restructuring has allowed the mixing and industrial products centers to approach the market as one seamless unit in order to better serve customers, he added.

With multiple capabilities at the compounding centers, the firm continues to have ongoing conversations with its key customers as AirBoss makes further investment decisions designed to support the growth plans of the businesses it serves, according to Bitsakakis.

However, he noted, a significant portion of AirBoss' business is focused on the finished goods it produces for the automotive, industrial and defense sectors.

Its automotive division, AirBoss Flexible Products, operates three plants in Auburn Hills, Mich., while the company's defense division is located in Landover, Md., with a production center in Quebec. The firm's industrial products division also is based in Quebec.

"We see a significant pipeline of growth opportunities in all our divisions," Bitsakakis said. The compounding, automotive, industrial and defense groups "are all showing amazing growth prospects for our company. The key for us will be to push hard and bring those opportunities to fruition in a way that is controlled and focused on flawless execution."

He said any evolution in the firm's compounding operations "will be designed to address the needs of our customers. We will add capacity to the product lines that our customers are most interested in while we continue to invest in improving quality, productivity and cost in order to help support our customers as they work to gain market share in their individual markets."

Because producing high quality products at competitive prices is critical to the company's growth plans, Bitsakakis said AirBoss plans to utilize a lean enterprise toolbox as it eliminates waste and reduces variability.

By cutting costs and improving the performance of the company's products, he said, its customers will continue to show confidence in the firm's approach and reward it with continued business. "As a proponent of six Sigma, and as a black belt myself for many years, I plan to make these disciplines a key part of our daily operating culture."

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