

# GREEN is GOOD

*A niche market and customer service are making a reputation for Green Rubber-Kennedy Ag*

*By Kimberly Griffiths, Associate Editor*

If there is one thing that the people who work with Green Rubber-Kennedy Ag will tell you, is that Green Rubber-Kennedy Ag is a customer-oriented company that puts forth the extra effort for their customers and suppliers.

“We call them morning, noon and night, through rain, sleet and snow. We’ve pulled them away from weekends, family events and other activities; but no vacations as of yet. Green Rubber’s going above-and-beyond is a normal occurrence for us,” says Steve Firth, parts manager for Fresh Express, a ready-to-eat salad processing company in Salinas, Calif.

Gary Leffman

The first time Fresh Express called on Green Rubber, they had challenges that few other companies were interested in taking on. With an idea for ready-to-eat salads packaged and sent out to stores, Fresh Express looked to Green Rubber for their processing needs, and found, in Firth's words, the only company that stepped up to the plate and performed beyond expectations.

"Green Rubber and Fresh Express grew up together, and hooked up while both companies were relatively young," says John Green, Jr., vice president of Green Rubber-Kennedy Ag, a full-line industrial products distributor located in Salinas, Calif., specializing in conveyor belting for the agricultural, food processing and industrial markets. "We couldn't really compete with other suppliers for their business, and were selling our customer services. We were, and still are, there for them night and day."

### Opening their own doors

Green Rubber was founded in August 1990, by John Green, Sr. and John Green, Jr., who had, until then, been working for another company in the belting industry. Green, Sr. had been working with the previous company for about 25 years, and

Green, Jr. had eight years in the industry under his belt. The elder Green had made his reputation in customer service and delivering on his promises. The younger Green was following in his father's customer-oriented footsteps.

But after receiving the latest in a series of pay cuts, the Greens decided, in their words, to make less money on their own.

Shortly thereafter, the doors to Green Rubber were opened, and this three- and four-person operation, with no inventory and nothing but service and reputations to sell, was in the market.

"We knew that our competitors could overwhelm us, and could buy and sell us ten times over," says Green. "We decided that for us to succeed, we would be a source for materials, but also would go the extra mile for our customers."

But because of the Greens' previous

business relationships, those competitors and Green Rubber held a mutual respect for each other. And instead of positioning themselves as direct competitors to Green Rubber, the companies helped Green Rubber establish credit, make contacts and develop their business.

"Because of that mutual respect, they were eager to see us do well," says Green. "They knew that we wouldn't do battle in their own backyards, so they put in a good word for us."

### Making a name for themselves

Green Rubber's first supplier was Dayco, a supplier of hose and fittings. While not in their primary focus of belting, the Greens took on the Dayco brand and set out to make a name for themselves with their customers.

After a year's success with Dayco, the Greens



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were able to take a step into the belting industry by purchasing their first piece of belting equipment—a used slitter that needed some repair work. With the slitter, they were able to start buying and selling belts direct. After some more time, suppliers started to extend product to Green Rubber on consignment.

"Our success was based on our service," says Green. "Service keeps you in business. Anyone can lower their prices, but the fact that we were always able to service the customers was invaluable."

"We didn't get business by being the cheapest, but by the services we had available," he says. "These days, it is satisfying going out and bidding for jobs from people who know we may be more expensive, but who are more interested in the service and quality."

It was at this point in their growth that Green Rubber came across Fresh

Express. From that successful arrangement, Green Rubber quickly became known as an industrial food processing plant's most favored vendor: a niche within which they have flourished.

"We knew that we couldn't get a big enough share of the general belting market," says Green, "so we went after our own niche market, which is primarily food processing customers and specialty belts, and other products related to that industry."

### Customer service commitment

"Green Rubber has a commitment to their customers to provide unequalled service," says Ray Redgate, manufacturer's representative for KVP Falcon, a plastic modular belting supplier. "When the company is involved with a product, the whole company is involved. From John, Sr. down, everyone is familiar with the product and is able to help the customer. A lot of companies aren't that supportive, but Green Rubber has a lot of enthusiasm."

Some long-time customers knew the

Greens from their roots in belting, and some even dealt with the elder Green at the previous company. Now, the Greens take pride in that they can straddle

the line between large company and small company.

Their sensibilities for customer service haven't changed much from the small company that had to move their entire conveyor belt inventory outside the warehouse so they could have room to work inside. They had the customer-oriented values imbued in their practices, and treated customers and employees like members of their extended family.

But today, even as the company has grown to become a force within the industry, Green Rubber-Kennedy Ag keeps to its fundamental roots.

"The people at Green Rubber are good people," says Firth. "Their service is world class. As they've grown larger, they've kept that small company mentality, where they are always doing for the customer. I consider them one of my top two vendors."

## Growth and partnership

Up until the end of last year, Green Rubber employed 30 people in the same 8,000-square-foot warehouse from their first day of business.

“We knew that we had to do something to expand,” says Green, “whether that meant buying a larger space or building a larger facility.”

Green’s solution came in a different form altogether. In January 2003, Green Rubber formed a partnership with Kennedy Bros., a spray and fertilizer equipment company located in Salinas, Calif. Green Rubber entered the partnership as majority leader and changed their collective business name to Green Rubber-Kennedy Ag. This move doubled the size of Green Rubber’s staff, and allowed them to move the day-to-day operations departments to a different venue—the Kennedy Bros. building. Green Rubber’s original space, which until then housed all operations, including management, sales and production, is now strictly a production facility.

“We planned the partnership changeover to take place in January because we thought it would be during a slower time business-wise,” says Green, “but our phone hasn’t stopped ringing from day one.”

As for changes in their operating practices, Green Rubber converted its computers, brought in an accounting team, and, in taking a cue from the Kennedy Bros.’ marketing team, moved some of their dusty inventory to the new building’s storefront, where it is selling.

## What goes around

“We expect to do \$15 million in sales this year,” says Green. “With the addition of this partnership, we feel like we’ll be plenty busy for the next decade. The change was not easy, but the results have been great.”

As of now, Green Rubber-Kennedy Ag’s products include conveyor belting, pumps and process supplies, hose and fittings, safety equipment, and spray and fertilizer equipment. Green Rubber-Kennedy Ag has found its niche in food processing, and is proud of saying that they now equip food-processing plants from the field to the shipping door. Their products, with the addition of Kennedy Bros. inventory, have

diversified, giving them more to offer their customers, making them a one-stop shop. Green expects growth from here on out.

When considering the company’s still-maintained philosophy and the growth and success of Green Rubber-

Kennedy Ag, Green says, “We think more along the lines of ‘what goes around, comes around.’ We have an honest, upstanding level of business. We go out of our way to do well for our customers. That shows in how people go out of their way to deal with us.” ■