Natural Cleaning Products Manufacturer Turns to Maine MEP For Assistance in Meeting Surging Market Demand

Gardiner, Maine: The sales event that launched Gracefully Clean LLC to new heights came less than a year ago when Hannaford, the New England supermarket chain, announced that it would carry Gracefully Clean products in selected Maine stores beginning in January 2013. The product placement coup led to an article about the company in the Kennebec Journal, and the resulting publicity brought Gracefully Clean’s products to a vastly larger audience, leading to strong sales growth.

Surging demand can be one of the greatest challenges for small entrepreneurial firms. The failure to ramp up production to meet increasing demand can jeopardize relationships with large retailers; but large investments in production capacity can leave small manufacturers overextended and unable to survive the inevitable downward fluctuations in product cycles.

To help her company meet the growth challenge presented by the Hannaford opportunity, Grace Montalbo, the founder and owner of Gracefully Clean, turned to the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP). In January 2013 she met with Maine MEP Project Manager Bill Whittier for an assessment of her manufacturing processes. Whittier quickly identified production efficiencies that cut in half the time required for bottling products and reduced handling time by 75 percent.

“Within minutes of observing our coding system for the insurance company requirements, Bill had a much more efficient system in place that reduced the handling of individual bottles by 75 percent,” Montalbo stated.

“He also immediately observed that our filling method was labor intensive, not ergonomically healthy and a revenue loss because of overfilling out bottles. Within a few minutes, he had a solution that measures an accurate and consistent amount for each bottle,” Montalbo continued.

“With those issues addressed, he watched the rest of the steps in our production and streamlined the assembly line by 50 percent by improving our handling and labeling procedures. Where before it took 8 hours to create 144 bottles, it now takes half that time,” the Gracefully Clean owner stated.

During a second visit, the MEP project manager worked with Montalbo to develop and implement changes in the product mixing process that involved replacing the batching and heating system, allowing the entire process to be done in a single location. This process improvement had the added benefit of reducing spillage and the possibility of injury from lifting heavy containers of liquid.

Most importantly, the new processes have given the company the ability to expand production in its current facility with the existing setup, postponing the need for a larger facility.

“The bottom line is that the time saved in production allows me more time for sales and marketing, the lifeblood for small business growth,” Montalbo emphasized. “Prior to the changes, I had only approximately four days a month to do my sales and marketing. With the new setup, it will increase to at least eight days per month.”

Maine MEP President Muriel Mosher noted that the services her nonprofit organization can offer have been particularly important for the state’s entrepreneurs.
“Maine has a growing segment of small manufacturers that are seizing on the consumer demand for health-conscious natural products. Maine’s strong brand appeal is rooted in the surge for green products and the consumer recognition that Maine manufacturers are environmentally responsible. The services we offer can help entrepreneurial firms like Gracefully Clean improve their production efficiencies and scale up to meet the needs of today’s eco-conscious consumers,” said Mosher.

About Maine MEP

Maine MEP is a program of the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development and an affiliate of the NIST under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2000 manufacturing and business “coaches” whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits, and enhanced global competitiveness. For more information on the Maine MEP program call 1-800-637-4634 or visit www.mainemep.org.