

Fiberglass firm has found niche while navigating choppy economy

Sarah Grile/Palm Beach Post



Beachcomber Fiberglass Technology employees Andrew Hicks, from far left, Jesus Palacios of Stuart, Noah Cohen of Jupiter and Donald Herman of Jensen Beach discuss prepping a mold to make consoles.

STUART — If you've ever perched on the fiberglass platform that juts out from the back of a boat, it might have been made by Beachcomber Fiberglass Technology. The Stuart Company, in business since 1978, builds those swim platforms and other ubiquitous items that are so much a part of boating and marinas that most people never think about their origins. Beachcomber built its reputation on the white fiberglass seating, deck boxes, stairways, bow pulpits and other essentials, such as the cabinets that hold clothes washers and dryers in place on yachts, said Michael Cohen, the company's president. The two dozen or so marine products are the lifeblood of the company, which records revenues of just under \$1 million a year. "I never wanted to be a mass marketer. We're a niche catering to the high-end of the market," Cohen said. But regardless of his wishes, the six-employee company that operates out of a 6,000-square-foot facility in Stuart Commerce Park keeps expanding.

While the marine industry has been hit hard by the recession, Beachcomber's sales have continued to grow about 10 percent a year, Cohen said. Clients have gone beyond marine recreation companies and now include Lockheed Martin, Pratt & Whitney, Hatteras Yachts, Miami-Dade County Parks & Recreation, Rampage Yachts, Walt Disney World and Sikorsky Aircraft. They've even gone international.

"Being small and diverse has helped. A lot of our relationships go back 25 years," Cohen said. "We do a little bit for a lot of people." Cohen, 60, started the business after working for three years as a guidance counselor at a Fort Pierce elementary school. With bachelors and master's degrees in special education from the University of Miami, but no business experience, he said he went in with common sense. His first project was building a multipurpose boat called a dory.

Soon, people were asking him to make other various components for boats. In 1988, he stopped building boats and began producing just the parts. Most of the time, the process begins with making a mold for the specific product, which they design and construct out of fiberglass. The company also does a lot of custom work, mostly for those outside the marine industry.

Take Jet Go International. The aviation-related company, which has an office in Boca Raton and manufacturing facility in Wellington, buys fiberglass casings for its aviation ground power units from Beachcomber. The units power air conditioning and avionics systems for jets when they are on the ground waiting for passenger pickups. "Beachcomber builds a really good quality product. They are great to deal with," said Jet Go CEO Roderick Gray, who sought out Beachcomber after his company moved here from Australia in 2009.

Perry Slingsby Systems in Jupiter is a long-time Beachcomber customer. Its lead mechanical ocean engineer, Dave DuPont, said Beachcomber makes the on-board consoles that hold the cables that transmit power to its robotic underwater vehicles. "Mike has done all sorts of stuff for us over the years," DuPont said. "He has made military spec parts for some of the Navy, as well as commercial grade parts."

In the last few years, the company's website also has drawn in new customers from around the world. "It's amazing to me, to come up on Google first. The Internet really levels the playing field. Customers can access you from anywhere," Michael Cohen said. "In the last six months, we've shipped to Greece, Italy and Australia. We sell the most products outside the U.S. to Canada." The company's trash receptacles, sold to parks and marinas in the United States, can even be found in Mexico, at Puerto Los Cabos, a huge resort. Although the Web has brought new customers easily, landing the federal government as a client took more effort. After nine months of paperwork, in February the company received its certification that allows any government agency to view and order its products over the Internet. Already, the firm has received several contracts through the Army Corps of Engineers, and in March received a \$125,000 contract from the General Services Administration's Federal Acquisition Services, based in Fort Worth, Texas.

One of Cohen's employees, his 31-year-old son Noah, said what he likes most about Beachcomber is the varied aspects of the business. "We do everything from design to engineering," Noah said. "We made the pillow-shaped seat for the Aladdin ride at Disney. It runs the gamut." His father said the company's longevity has played a big role in its success. "When we had the hurricanes, people lost lids of dock boxes, and they called us. We are still here."

Beachcomber Fiberglass Technology

Where: Stuart.

What they do: Builder of fiberglass products for a variety of industries, including marine, aviation and military.

Number of employees: 6.

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