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Hello, dollies: New product manufactured in Ada, not Asia

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ADA -- This is a story about American ingenuity bringing jobs to Ada instead of Asia.

It is about innovation by George Wolber, research and development guru for Associated Plastics in Ada, and David King, president of ICB, maker of Samson Carts and Dollies in Chicago.

The problem that starts the story was simple: Wooden dollies used to move furniture and other heavy objects break too easily and, as King says, "You cannot repair a wooden dolly."

King found a solution: Develop a plastic, recyclable dolly, with replaceable parts.

The result is Associated Plastics is employing six more people, two per shift, to manufacture dollies made of plastic.

It is competing with traditional furniture dollies of **hardwood**, 90 percent of which are made in China or in other Asian countries and often break after 18 to 36 months of use.

Plastic dollies have longer lives than their **hardwood** counterparts, lasting 10 to 15 years or longer, and will save movers money in the long run, he said.

When parts break, they go to the recycling center instead of the landfill. A new part easily replaces the old.

At first, King's prototype cost too much to overcome the wooden dolly's domination. He approached dozens of companies about how to make his dolly more cheaply, but no one had any ideas.

"They had a very narrow view... They could not think outside the box," he said. "They were not creative."

Then someone told him about Associated Plastics, an injection molding company which manufactures parts for lawn tractors and trailers, health care equipment, toys and other products. It employs 45.

In November, King showed the prototype to Wolber, Associated's sales, research and development specialist and part-owner.

Wolber's first impression: King's dolly could carry a tank from the General Dynamics factory in Lima when it only needed to carry furniture.

So Wolber worked to reduce the dolly's weight from 14 pounds to 9 pounds.

He eliminated some ribs on its underside and added a cross-patterned rib for more strength. When he finished, the dolly could support an upright piano weighing 1,200 pounds.

More good news: Because it is made in Ada instead of Asia, American customers have the assurance of a "face-to-face relationship," and quality control, King said.

But perhaps most important to the plastic dolly's ability to sell is its compatibility with the wooden dolly, Wolber said.

That is because the moving and service industries are slow to change. If a new product looks too different, it will be rejected, Wolber and King said.

"All (King) wanted to do was simulate the wooden one," Wolber said.

The world's scrap heap of failed products is littered with great, functional innovations whose only flaw was overlooking tradition.

"You have no idea," King said.

There was the comfort-enhanced version of the mechanic's creeper, a cart which mechanics lie on to work under a car. Someone developed a creeper to fit the shape of one's back.

"It was real comfortable. They could not sell them," Wolber said. "We do not make that anymore."

Its fatal flaw was that it resembled an oversized guitar.

Only with caution and perseverance can new ideas prevail.

When King in 2002 peddled plastic carts to libraries instead of wooden ones, he was told, "Wood was good enough for grandpa. It is good enough for me."

He overcame tradition to some extent, selling more plastic carts to libraries in Europe than the United States.

So King has been hitting the road again, this time peddling plastic dollies to moving companies in Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Indiana, Michigan and Illinois.

His goal is to sell 200,000 plastic furniture dollies in the next year, which would be about 10 percent of the market.

Associated Plastics will manufacture all of them over the next 12 to 18 months.

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GEORGE WOLBER, research and development guru for Associated Plastics in Ada, attaches wheels onto plastic, recyclable dollies that are manufactured at the plant. The plastic dollies are competing with traditional furniture dollies of plywood, 90 percent of which are made in China or in other Asian countries. (Photo by Randy Roberts)