

# Proco Products: A Joint Ex



*Pumping operation with expansion joints in a steel mill.*

*As a global leader in the design and supply of expansion joints for piping and ducting systems for over 30 years, Proco Products has long staked its claim as a top industry name. Known in equal parts for its complete line of products and quality customer service, the company's founding principles continue to inform its upcoming ambitions. Pump Engineer had the pleasure of speaking with Rob Coffee, VP of Sales & Marketing, about how Proco's commitment to leading with quality and integrity permeates its role within the industry today.*

*By Kelly McLaughlin, Editor*

## **History**

Founded by Gene Johnson and Merv Vater, Proco Products' history of manufacturing expansion joints dates back to the 1930s, when the rubber expansion joint was invented by the old Uniroyal Company in 1930. Having met in 1972 while working in the industry, Merv and Gene were more than just business partners: They were friends who shared the firm belief that, when it comes to business, one must "work harder and smarter than their competitors".

Many years later, Gene was working as a sales manager

of expansion joints for PROtective Coatings, during which time Merv approached him with the idea to buy the expansion joint assets. Together, they made the purchase, changed the name and, thus, Proco Products, Inc. was established. Since 1984, Proco has been a place that many loyal employees have been proud to call home.

## **Serving the industry**

The duo's goal in mind was ambitious: Produce expansion joint products offshore and have an inventory of goods on the shelves so that when clients requested

# Expansion Towards Success



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a product, Proco could ship it immediately. By the time Proco opened its doors, it already had inventory — and from there, it prospered. “Merv was a good salesman, and Gene was a good operations and marketing guy, so it was a great team. During the tenure of Proco, we’ve always turned a profit and serviced business well,” says Rob Coffee, VP of Sales & Marketing, in recounting the company’s origins.

Today, the company has expanded to a team of roughly 30 employees and prides itself on having a top-notch customer service department. The company has opted not to use an operator — rather, when people call in using their 800 number, they’re sent directly into sales so that the person answering the phone is able to assist the customer instantly. Beyond their customer service team, Proco is home to administration, order processing, engineering and project and international departments, as well as to a warehouse team responsible for processing shipments. In terms of service, the company’s customer service staff provides technically-detailed information to engineers or contractors looking for information to help



in their design or installation processes. In addition, the company’s manufacturing reps in the field help to troubleshoot systems when issues arise, whether they be design-based or operation-based.

Rounding out their dynamic approach to service is the company’s offering for walk-downs at end user facilities with distributors — whether it be for a maintenance and storeroom replacement or a general survey of expansion joints at a plant, Proco is committed to being on the job. When asked about the company’s most significant priorities, Rob doesn’t hesitate to answer. “We start with our customers — distribution is our life blood. We’re here to support distributors and their customers around the world.” As such, Proco breaks down their markets into four segments:



*Large diameter check valves readied for shipment.*



- General distribution, wherein they work with rubber and gasket companies, bearing houses, general mill supplies and the servicing industry
- The HVAC market, in which the company's manufacturing reps work with pipe valves and fitting distributors with engineers, as well as assist the contractors on specifications
- The water and wastewater treatment market, wherein their manufacturing reps help water utility distributors and engineers on specifications, as well as assist contractors installing the products
- EPC firms with whom the company's "power and process" manufacturing reps work on large capital projects with a substantial amount of detail involved with the supply of products.

Considering the fact that distribution accounts for more than 60 percent of the company's domestic business, it comes as no surprise that Proco has employed such detail on their market approach. "We work closely with distributors in developing business and helping their end users with the products that we provide," says Rob. "Our mode of operation is to work with the end user to define what they're looking for and then pointing them in the direction of a distributor that best meets their needs. Our goal is to service the ultimate end user, but through distribution."

In addition to its domestic business, Proco's presence knows no boundaries. Rob notes that because of the company's strong presence in project development, their trade name has seen significant growth throughout the years on an international level. Due to their engineering presence with providing technical support and the development of specifications, they've sold into markets such as Russia, the Middle East, Europe, Asia and more.

## Quality assured; integrity ensured

Looking to the near future, Proco's expansion is focused on its product lines. "We're always looking to expand our market presence and improve on our product mix," Rob shares. "As far as expansion is concerned, we're



Proco Products, Inc. Headquarters in Stockton, CA.

always looking for agents to represent us in various places where we are deficient. We continue to improve our processes and our product mix to ensure that we're giving the industry the absolute best products to help with their various systems." Proco's vast product base is not without a strong backing of certification, either. The company recently achieved NSF/ANSI 61 certification on a number of their products, making them certified for use with potable water systems. With regards to how Proco may serve the pump industry in particular, Rob notes that expansion joints act as a failsafe for good pumping operations. "You want the expansion joint to take the pressure surge or thermal growth of a system or the offset of piping as plants settle," he explains. "We call it 'the weak link in the system', but it's the expansion joint that takes the hit, and not a major piece of equipment such as a pump."

It's also important to the company to remain actively involved with various yet significant organizations. For his part, Rob currently serves on the board of directors for the National Association of Hose & Accessories Distributors (NAHAD), with whom Proco is partnering for the upcoming Hose + Coupling Conference in October. Rob cites the company's strong belief in expansion joint safety as among the top of their motivation for their role in events of this nature. In addition, Proco is involved with the Fluid Sealing Association, of which Rob will be installed in October as the president. "Our company considers the FSA presence to be very important to our business," Rob explains. "We are always giving back to make sure that good expansion joint design is continued and improved upon."

Remaining atop industry trends may sometimes be a feat, but Proco gears itself toward forward thinking in order to stay atop the changing tides. A trend that the company pays particular attention to monitoring is the growing role of the internet. "As an industry, we talk all the time about the pitfalls of internet selling, especially with industrial products." In response, Proco makes an effort to put their agent base out on the marketplace to talk about products and to work with engineers and end users. "Good expansion joint knowledge and understanding aids in the serviceability and safety of their plants," Rob explains. "We're always wanting to capitalize on our ability to technically present our products so that we can combat the internet sellers out there."

Setting itself apart as an industry leader wouldn't be possible without the company's loyalty to its presiding philosophy, which Rob believes is the narrative of the customer experience. "What I think is not necessarily important — what our customers or our agents may say about Proco is much more valuable," Rob shares. The feedback that the company commonly receives, he notes, is that someone is always present to answer the phone and take down any information needed to get a price and lead time for various projects or needs. Additionally, the fact that they have an inventory of 2 to 2.5 million dollars of product on the shelf ready to be



shipped out has certainly helped to give Proco a good name in the field. Every factor, however, is infused with careful attention to detail. “We live and die on our customer service,” Rob says. “We want to do our very best to help the customer.”

The customer-centric philosophy is underlined by company values that are universal among Proco’s employees. “Here at Proco, a lot of us are growing old together,” Rob shares. “The late Merv Vater and our current president, Ed Marchese, have created a culture that’s very family-oriented when people come to work for us.” That effect shows, too — the majority of employees have stayed with the company, with the average experience clocking in at around the 15-year mark. When looking at longevity and service to the industry, taking into account such loyalty sheds light on the way in which Proco vows to take care of its employees.

In acknowledging the importance of the employee experience, Proco invests in a valuable asset to the company’s enduring presence: the younger generation. “We’ve taken the approach of developing folks that show initiative and want to better their lives. We want to help them to grow into a position where they could be the president someday, if they really wanted to.” The company leads with an effort to promote from within, having promoted several people from the warehouse to customer service positions. With the experience of having learned

the products and terminology while working hard to show initiative and the desire to transfer, Proco’s employees are met with ample room for freedom. “We’re giving the opportunity for younger folks to be able to step up, and it’s been a pleasure for all of us more seasoned veterans to aid in the development of the younger folks so that we leave the company in good hands.”

More than anything, however, Rob emphasizes that the company aims to give their employees the opportunity to expand their knowledge of the industry so that they may decide for themselves if it’s where they wish to flourish. “I think the developed folks that are coming along have a great career ahead of them at Proco Products,” says Rob. “But the younger folks are teaching some of us more seasoned people that there are other ways of doing business, too. It goes both ways, and I think listening to one another is the key in doing business and improving processes. We have an open-door policy here at Proco, and I think it generates great ideas for improvement.”



*Proco VP, Rob Coffee, doing expansion joint surveys out in the field.*

## Biography



Rob Coffee joined Proco Products as Marketing Manager in 1994. Now holding the position of Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Rob’s duties include traveling around the USA and Canada to conduct engineering seminars and

sales training. Having been in the industry for over 30 years, Rob brings significant application experience to Proco as a result of his years both behind the desk and in the field. Rob currently serves as the Vice President and Board Member of the Fluid Sealing Association, as well as a Board Member for NAHAD.

