

Persistence, Hard Work and Tenacity Revive a Good Product with Bad Timing

By Brenda Bredahl

When Jim Bradac launched his Ceme-Tube™ product at the 2007 World of Concrete Show in Las Vegas, he wasn't ready for the overwhelmingly positive reception the product received. And with a major investment in a new product for the construction industry, he didn't anticipate the economic downturn from 2008 to 2012 that would have a negative impact on the product's market.

Show-goers swarmed his booth, saying that the round, plastic blow-molded tubes for pouring concrete footings, columns, piers and light poles were an outstanding solution, compared to the cardboard forms that dominated the market. If that wasn't enough, on the second day of the show he was visited by the manufacturer of the leading cardboard tube forms.

"They wanted to discuss a partnership, but based on the reception that I received from contractors and the potential of a plastic forming tube, I thought I would stay the course and see where it would lead," Bradac said.

Bradac initially outsourced manufacturing to blow-molding companies in Iowa, Kansas and Michigan and stocked up on inventory as molders required large runs. Blow molding is the preferred manufacturing process for hollow plastic products, such as milk jugs. He leased office and warehouse space in Hudson, only to find the sales didn't arrive as quickly as he had hoped due to the sagging economy at the time.

Generation of an idea

While working as a stainless-steel fabricator through his one-person business, Prestige Sheet Metal, Bradac came up with the idea for Ceme-Tube when he wanted to build a cabin on



Nikki Wenz- Marketing/Advertising, Paula Kersten- Office Manager, Jim Bradac - Owner and CEO of Ceme Tube, Kitty Tube, and St. Croix Valley Blow Molding, Thomas Bradac- Machine operator/plant technician, Peter Bradac- Machine operator/plant technician, Monica Bradac- Manager of Kitty Tube

property that had high groundwater. He sought a waterproof tube for poured footings but found that such a product was not available.

Then while visiting a friend in Woodbury, Minnesota, he noticed that the contractor who was building his friend's deck put garbage bags around the cardboard tubes in preparation for pouring footings. Again, he saw the need for such a product.

An internet search showed no patents or products, so he began to design what would become Ceme-Tube. Starting in 2004, he began the long patenting process for blow-molded tubes made from recycled HDPE plastic that are waterproof, UV resistant, maintenance-free and durable. Ceme-Tube now holds patents in United States and Canada as the only plastic forming tube available.

Ceme-Tube has three product lines. The Standard comes in 8", 10", 12", 18", 24" and 30" diameters and is manufactured in 4-foot long sections that can be stacked up to 20-feet tall for poured-in-place footings. An optional cap is available to prevent moisture or unwanted access while construction is underway. The Bollard Ceme-Tube is a pour-in-place

bollard. It includes two components: a reflective caution yellow tube for above ground plus a black tube for the portion below grade. Bollard Ceme-Tubes cost less than steel-pipe bollards and are maintenance free upon installation. The Light Pole Ceme-Tube comes in yellow, architectural bronze and concrete gray. It is made in 18", 24" and 30" diameters. Benefits include lower cost, architectural aesthetics and quicker installation time than cardboard tube forms. "Contractors say they can install many times the number of light poles with this product in a shorter time compared to cardboard tubes. Plus, there are no moisture-related issues," Bradac said.

After the positive reception at World of Concrete, the economic downturn took hold, and the construction market declined rapidly. Bradac then made the decision to move the warehouse to an unheated pole barn on his property. As the recession deepened, he began to worry, especially for his large family's future. "I was sitting there with a lot of inventory to introduce to an industry in steep decline," Bradac recalls. "I began to think I had opened a door to a nightmare and might regret the decision of investing in this venture."

Kids and cats to the rescue

Meanwhile, Bradac revived Prestige Sheet Metal that he'd operated since 1991 by taking on new fabrication work while trying to maintain Ceme-Tube. He worried about feeding his family, paying his mortgage and maintaining loans that he had used to finance Ceme-Tube. Between 2008 and 2012, he met with bankruptcy attorneys several times, but refused to go through with the process. Instead, he worked in his sheet metal business at a pace that not many could sustain.

Bradac was confident he had a good product, but with the economic decline and the resulting worry, he needed a break.

One particularly cold winter, a few of his 10 children were worried about the family cats, who lived in the unheated pole barn because family members were allergic to cats.

Despite the darkness that surrounded his businesses, a light went on. "I told my kids, 'Don't worry I'll think of something to help your cats.' I began to remodel a 24" Ceme-Tube, insulating it, and making a home for the cats. The cats loved it. The kids loved it. Using the Ceme-Tube products, I thought maybe I could make cat houses and sell them online to try to recover something from my predicament."

Kitty-Tube™ was born, and the product began to sell very well on Amazon.com. Daughter Monica runs the product line, and it is currently listed as a coveted "Amazon's Choice" product. Kitty-Tube is available in both a feral cat version with straw and a domestic cat version with a pillow and carries a lifetime warranty.

"Kitty Tube really took off and that allowed me to not give up hope on Ceme-Tube," Bradac said. "By fall 2014, my pole barn was busting out at the seams, so we moved into our current space on Schommer Drive in Hudson. Getting a modern warehouse again was a big boost to my morale."

By 2016, Ceme-Tube was doing well with many new and repeat customers, including a well-known convenience store chain in the Midwest, where his light pole bases can be seen. "I was still having issues with finding a good contract blow-molding manufacturer, especially in the area. There is only one, located 100-plus miles away."

Bringing manufacturing in-house

Bradac's newest company, St. Croix Valley Blow Molding, was founded in 2017 to bring the manufacturing of Ceme-Tube in-house. It is the St. Croix Economic Development Corp.'s Emerging Business of the Year.

In early 2017 Bradac got a call from a broker who had equipment available from a company that ceased operation. Bradac purchased one of the blow-molding machines. "It was over \$100,000 to purchase this used, worn-out machine and to transport it on four semi-trucks. I couldn't believe that this machine, which costs well over \$2.5 million new, was heading to Hudson. It was exciting, but this machine needed a lot of work before it would run again."

With help of sons, Thomas and Peter, as well as hired consultants, Bradac spent the rest of 2017 into 2018 to restore the machine. In 2018 St. Croix Valley Blow Molding made its first run of product for the convenience store customer.

"Our sweat equity rebuilt this machine," Bradac says. "We worked 12-14 hours a day, six days a week to restore the machine and build the new plant. We were out of product while building the plant, and it was not easy. We encountered many struggles during this start up, but kept the faith and continued to move forward."

The company recently installed a 7-axis robotic cutting system for the trimming process. In late 2018, a national distributor approached the company to represent Ceme-Tube, and the company is working with a

state department of transportation to incorporate Ceme-Tube into specs for traffic lights. Bradac hopes other DOTs will follow suit.

Upcoming products include Keg-A-Tube™, a self-contained portable beer keg cooler/dispenser, and an insulated dog house called Canine-Cave™. St. Croix Valley Blow Molding also will offer contract blow molding for the Twin Cities area, where none exist.

As the company reaches full operation in 2019, Bradac anticipates hiring employees for production. "In the early days of Ceme-Tube, I put it all on the line," Bradac says. "My house was foreclosed on three times, but I didn't walk away or give up – it's just not in my genes. I just believed in the products and that hard work and persistence would pay off. We're in a much better situation now and I see a great future."

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just the facts

St. Croix Blow Molding

Est. 2017

Ceme-Tube

Est. 2007

Kitty Tube

Est. 2010

6 employees

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