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Benlee: A trailer truck firm that knows all about scrap

US-based roll-off trailer manufacturer Benlee has supplied oil drillers in Canada and demolition companies back home in Michigan, but the scrap recycling industry is imprinted in the firm's DNA. Having 2000 trailer trucks on the road – most of which are on the North American continent – Benlee is now ready to take 'major steps' into the global market, confirms the company's owner Greg Brown.

'I've got news for you,' says Greg Brown when asked about Benlee's ambitions. 'We are planning a trip to Europe in March seeking a potential joint-venture partner for the European, Russian and Middle East markets. This company is already active in these markets now. For us, it is a big thing. We have developed a system that could revolutionise the roll-off truck market globally.'

Aged 58, Brown has been at Benlee's helm for 9 years, but the company's history stretches back much further. Benlee's founder Bill Wolok started the business back in 1974; originally a scrap metal trucker, Wolok got involved in buying and selling big trailer trucks at a time when larger companies were taking over the scrap business in America. Founded in Detroit, Michigan, Benlee focused initially on manufacturing heavy-duty trailers

for customers in the same US state. Slowly but surely, however, the business began to expand its area of operation such that, eventually, it was delivering trailers throughout the country.

Change needed

In 2003, Wolok decided it was time for a new generation to take over the running of the firm. In Greg Brown, he found the ideal candidate. With many years' experience in marketing and general management for major businesses such as General Electric and Honeywell, Brown decided the time was right 'to run a company and work for myself'.

For Brown, what made Benlee an attractive proposition to purchase? 'First, it was a company with a great history and good products,' he explains. 'However, change was needed to ensure Benlee's future. It needed investments in manufacturing systems and marketing.'

Clearly, you can make good products, but when things go wrong from the manufacturing engineering perspective, you have a problem.’ The company suffered from poor productivity and manufacturing, which duly raised costs and slowed delivery. Brown managed to make improvements to the delivery infrastructure, technology and marketing while major funds were ploughed into MRP - or Materials Requirement Planning - and into computers for drawing and designing.

Lighter-weight trailers

Forty years after its start-up, Benlee is headquartered in Romulus just 6 miles or around 10 kilometres outside of Detroit in the heart of what used to be America’s booming automotive industry. In a large, modern production hall close to Detroit’s international airport, the latest in trailer technology is assembled at an average rate of 200 units per year. The heavy-duty trailers from the early days have been replaced by modern lightweight trailers. ‘We developed new lightweight but strong products capable of carrying heavier loads - so lighter-weight trailers that can carry more,’ says Brown. ‘The other thing we did was to develop a trailer that replaces straight trucks. Basically, there are two different types of truck: the one that disconnects - the tractor and the trailer that it hooks up to; and the other one, much more common, which is attached and which does not disconnect. So we made a trailer that is much more versatile than a truck and does what a roll-off truck does.’

Market-pleasing products

Over its 40-year history, Benlee has brought out a long list of market-pleasing products, from

roll-off trailers and roll-off trucks, to crushed car trailers, dump trailers and open-top trailers. The company’s line-up of roll-off trailers includes seven styles and 33 models. It offers everything from 26- to 53-foot trailers and trucks, from two to eight axles, and one-box and two-box roll-off models. And Benlee is not only in the manufacturing business; it also sells used trailers and trucks.

Although Benlee has gone as far as to deliver roll-off trailers to oil drilling companies in Canada, its main focus both at home and abroad has always been - and will always be, it says - the recycling and waste management industries. In the USA and Canada, ‘we have seen big growth in trailers versus straight trucks because of better use of capital: you simply make better and more flexible use of the engine’, Brown notes. In Europe, meanwhile, he believes Benlee’s roll-off containers with cable could well offer a good alternative to hook-lift versions. ‘We think companies may have to switch to cabled roll-on roll-off containers,’ he ventures.

Built to last

According to Brown, Benlee has 2000 trailer trucks on the road worldwide, most of which are on the North American continent. ‘We have a very few on the South American mainland, but also in Iceland, Aruba, Grand Cayman and Mexico - new ones but the heavy-duty models too,’ he points out. He reckons that half of the trucks built in the 1970s and 1980s are still being driven around today. ‘In fact, at one of our scrap yards in North Carolina (see box), we are still running a 1979 unit that’s on the road picking up containers every day.’ □

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Benlee’s own scrap yard experience

Forty years ago, Bill Wolok left the scrap metal recycling business to start Benlee; 37 years later, Wolok’s successor Greg Brown decided to go back into scrap metal recycling. In 2007, he purchased two scrap yards in North Carolina: Raleigh Metal Recycling, Goldsboro Metal Recycling and took over Wilson Metal Recycling in 2013. ‘It was a good economic opportunity and we understand the industry,’ Brown explains. It was also a wise purchase from a marketing point of view. ‘Being a user of the products ourselves, we learn what works and what the industry needs, and what can go wrong in every-day practice,’ Brown observes. Combined, the three sites in North Carolina process an average of 85 000 tonnes of ferrous and 20 million pounds of non-ferrous scrap (9000 tonnes) on a yearly basis, yielding a turnover of some US\$ 43 million. In effect, these scrap operations generate a total revenue far larger than the US\$ 14 million per annum from Benlee’s trailer manufacturing activities.

EDITOR’S TIP: Women in Recycling highlights an example of technological innovation - see page 51



Benlee’s conventional roll off trailer.

Two box roll off trailer.

Super mini roll off trailer.