



An Icon in the Making

ICON Direct is experiencing a growing demand for its custom-made fender skirts and other RV exterior products thanks to its focus on using high-quality materials and offering guaranteed customer satisfaction.

By K. Schipper

When John Loewen started ICON Technologies in 1997, he had a detailed knowledge of thermoformed plastics and some product ideas in mind, but very modest facilities and minimal staff.

Today, the business is much larger. In 2015, the parent company of ICON Direct finished a major expansion of its physical plant and a doubling of its staff – and with good reason. Business is so brisk that the company has had to expand its shipping lead times to two weeks.

What's made ICON Direct so successful?

According to Loewen, it's any number of things, all done well, from the Winkler, Manitoba-based company's integrated marketing model to its unique products to its guaranteed customer satisfaction with every purchase.

Or, as Loewen says, "A new customer

can be assured that every purchase will meet or exceed his expectations."

Success by Design

Certainly one of the remarkable things about ICON Direct is that Loewen's company has grown and prospered in an area that's not likely to spring to anyone's mind as a manufacturing hotbed for North America.

Winkler – a community of fewer than 12,000 people located southwest of Winnipeg, the provincial capital of Manitoba, and within about a dozen miles of the border with North Dakota – does have a strong manufacturing segment, however. Loewen says much of it is focused on metals manufacturing for agriculture.

Loewen grew up in Winkler, and says he gained a great deal of knowledge from his father.

"My family has been involved in mold-making and pattern-making – designing products," he says. "My dad is a craftsman who specialized in molds and pattern-making, so I grew up in the mold-making shop. Basically, I had some ideas and some knowledge and that's how I got started."

He adds that it was the ideas that drove him to start ICON from humble beginnings: A "1,600-square-foot glorified two-car garage."

Focusing on doing custom molding for industrial markets, as well as transportation (think both RVs and heavy trucks), the business has grown into a facility encompassing a corporate headquarters, a product development center and warehouse space that's nearly 30 times as large as its original building.

Loewen explains that getting into the RV industry wasn't a difficult choice to make.

PHOTOS BY ART WIEBE



From its large manufacturing facility in Winkler, Manitoba, Canada, ICON Direct is strategically positioned to serve the RV market in North America. Founder John Loewen is pictured above next to a large map showing ICON's facility in relation to the continental U.S. and at left with ICON's management team and front office staff.

"At the time we started, there were a number of RV manufacturers in Canada, including a few right here in Winkler and the surrounding areas, so we supplied custom thermoformed products to them," he says. "In 2001, we were given the opportunity to buy a company that was supplying the aftermarket. We acquired their product line, tooling and equipment, and along

with that came the already established relationships with the wholesale distributors in Canada and the United States. This was our entry into the RV aftermarket business."

Up until 2008, though, the RV market really wasn't a very big segment for ICON. However, the Great Recession proved to be a real taking-off point for the company. Loewen says it was the closing of Fleetwood

RV, once the largest RV maker, which got him thinking.

"I just thought, 'That has to have left a void somewhere that needs to be filled,'" he says. "So, we went about doing research and found exactly that. Everybody was trying to maintain their Fleetwood products, but nobody was looking after their needs. So, we began working on that – supplying as much of the Fleetwood line as we could get our hands on."

However, he didn't stop there. ICON also began identifying model years that were also no longer being supported with product by their RV makers and developed products for those "orphaned RVs".

"Today, ICON has a full range of products that aren't really being supported by the OEMs for various reasons," he says. "Our specialty is producing product that's

not readily available under other means. That has worked really well for us.”

Catering to Consumers

Loewen credits much of the company's success to its relationship with end consumers through its company website. It's those RV owners who keep new product in the pipeline.

“Back in 2008, we told people we had a small selection of fender skirts on our website. If we didn't have the exact model that customers were looking for we offered to recreate it for them. All the customer had to do was send us their broken pieces. This is how we were able to recreate product for the orphaned RVs and build up our product library.”

Today, ICON has more than 300 fender skirt models to choose from.

Loewen adds that fender skirts are the company's most popular product because there aren't a lot of other companies that offer them and they can be difficult to ship. Plus, the demand is substantial because of their location on the RV, where they are prone to bumps and other damage.

“Our specialty is really products for the outside of the coach,” he says. “We focus on the exterior component parts because there's a larger demand than on the inside products. There's more wear-and-tear, and they're more susceptible to the weather and the sun.”

Other products the company manufactures include wind deflectors (an item also popular with the truck market), air-conditioning shrouds, holding tanks, skylights, storage pods and specialty items. ICON Direct also offers replacement bathtubs, which Loewen says is the only interior item the company currently makes, although he adds other products are in development.

Although ICON will ship directly to RV owners through its icondirect.com website, the company also works with dealers who have access to the supplier's products through its distribution network. While much of what ICON sells isn't technical to install, “it's still better for them to go to the dealer,” Loewen says.

Additionally, Loewen says his company makes things as easy as possible for dealers and distributors, first by having many items



ICON team members pose with some of the company's point-of-purchase displays, which dealers can use to promote the sale of skylights and air-conditioner shrouds.



ICON touts its website with helping the company stay abreast of current trends in fender skirts.

in stock. And, for many years, it also has made a point of supplying point-of-purchase materials, including a three-sided display that helps RV owners find Icon Direct products.

“When the consumer walks into a dealership, they may not necessarily be thinking about the crack in their fender skirt or their broken air-conditioning shroud, but the display brings it back to mind,” he says. “ICON brings value to the dealership by offering POPs, fender skirt signs and online search databases. These are resources that our competitors may not be offering the dealers.”

The products ICON makes come in all shapes and sizes, which requires different styles and sizes of packaging. Fortunately, the company recently purchased a CNC-operated box maker, which allows it to design boxes specific to its products, which eliminates the need for void-filling materials and reduces package size, and thus, shipping costs.

Meanwhile, because of the company’s location so near the border, orders to the U.S. are trucked directly through customs, then shipped to their destinations.

“For supplying North America, Winkler’s not a bad spot to be,” says its native son. “We’re about equal distance to all the outside parameters of North America.”

Growing Bigger – and Better

It’s certainly not shipping issues that recently caused ICON to announce it would be expanding its lead times to 14 days. Loewen says it’s simply a matter of keeping up with what he calls an enormous demand – even though the company just substantially increased its warehouse space.

Extending its lead times to 14 days allows the company to ensure every customer will receive the high-quality product ICON is known for, according to Loewen.

“Our products typically are of better quality than what the unit originally came with from the factory,” Loewen says. “For instance, our skylights are more than twice the thickness of the original part. This makes it easy for customers to select ICON over other aftermarket brands.

With more than 600 SKUs (stock keeping units) in its inventory for the aftermarket, Loewen says fully 80 percent of those are in stock and ready to ship at all times.



ICON fender skirts are available in more than 20 original OEM colors. The company recently completed a major expansion of its facilities and doubled the size of its staff in order to serve a growing demand for its products.



ICON Direct keeps roughly 1,000 molds and fixtures in its new climate-controlled warehouse. About 20 percent of the company’s products are made-to-order; the rest are always in stock and available for next-day shipping.



An ICON worker does trimming and detailing on a fender skirt, an initial step prior to the painting and packaging of the product. ICON has been particularly successful selling RV exterior replacement products no longer supported by RV manufacturers.

Concern for lead times and product availability were driving forces behind ICON's big 2015 expansion. The larger building capacity is allowing the company to add equipment specifically designed to produce certain product lines.

"For instance, because of the increasing demand for rooftop air-conditioning shrouds, we acquired a piece of equipment that will specifically produce that product line," he says. Loewen expects that when everything is in place, ICON will be able to resume its shorter lead times to ensure customer satisfaction.

Still, for a company whose physical location could best be described as remote, Loewen believes the reason people choose Icon Direct over its competitors is its accessibility – via its websites.

"It's easy to navigate, it's easy to find the product, and it's easy to make the selection," he says. "With lookup-our-skirts.com, any

level of customer can go to the website and choose a fender skirt they need without having to have a VIN number or a part number. All they need to know is the size of the product and the unit that it's fitting to. This is something nobody else in the industry offers."

Even so, Loewen sees places where ICON can continue to improve.

"I want to have a broader selection of products, with even better availabilities throughout our network of dealers and distributors," he says. "That's something I'd like to expand on in the future, but we're definitely working in that direction."

Not surprisingly, a man who could see a business opportunity during a major economic recession is pretty optimistic about the industry today and ICON's role in its future.

"I think ICON is very well-positioned moving forward to supply aftermarket products to accompany the growing demands of the RV industry," he says. **PRO**



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