



Supplier News

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Biocomposites firm plans product launch

DETROIT - Five years into its business life, biocomposites specialist FlexForm Technologies LLC still is working toward a major breakthrough, but at least it is receiving more buzz from customers.

``When I first came on board, we had to pound on doors to get anyone's attention," Chief Executive Officer Gregg Baumbaugh said during an interview in Detroit. ``Now they're the ones calling us."

Elkhart, Ind.-based FlexForm's natural-fiber and polypropylene compression molded components are part of three major product launches for the 2005 model year, including DaimlerChrysler AG's Mercedes M-Class sport utility vehicle and the Jeep Grand Cherokee SUV.

FlexForm opened in 1999 as Kafus Indiana Bio-Composites, adding natural fibers such as hemp, jute, flax, sisal and kenaf to plastics to provide structural support.

The company name changed in 2001 when private investors bought into the operation, convinced that the biocomposites made economic and environmental sense. The firm does not disclose sales information or details on its owners, although Baumbaugh - who joined the firm in 2003 - noted they do not have a background in traditional manufacturing.

``The great thing about our investors is that they let us run the company," he said.

With the new owners on board, FlexForm has won a place on the Dodge Viper, Ford Motor Co.'s Freestyle sport wagon and the Mercedes. The company also has broken into two new markets, making substrates for the interior trim on farm equipment and small aircraft.

FlexForm researchers are looking at ways to use the natural fibers' ability to absorb moisture and block unwanted sounds in future products, while fine-tuning existing programs, Baumbaugh said.

The firm has added a second compression molding line at its 25-employee Elkhart facility, and is considering other expansions as sales increase.

At about half the weight of glass-filled PP and easier to recycle, a biocomposite also can offer some cost savings - an important connection for an auto industry facing tight price demands, said sales manager Harry Hickey. The combination is helping FlexForm open doors.

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