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Bringing the industry together
INDUSTRY GIANTS: TROJAN BATTERY

Trojan Battery has always had a distinctive business style characterized by the management approach of this family-owned firm. Kevin Desmond reports.

The twists and turns of the Trojan story

The history of Trojan Battery is a complex one. At one level it's a simple tale of how a family business that started as a small repair shop in downtown Los Angeles could turn into an internationally respected firm. But it's also a story of how clever business management, an ability to understand the technology trends that shaped the 20th century, and a close-knit family could survive the twists and turns of some 90 years of trading.

It all began with George Reginald Godber.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts on Independence Day 1899, he was just a teenager when he first stumbled on the world of electric batteries.

His location? A Holland L-Class submarine off the coast of Ireland towards the end of World War I. His job was to ensure the reliability of the submarine's power source — vital to the boat's mission and safety, irrespective of the war still raging around him.

The war over, Godber and Carl Speer, his future brother-in-law, set up a small auto parts business in a garage (where the Occidental Towers eventually were to be built in downtown Los Angeles).

Their business idea, which took time to formulate, was to take what they had learned in the US Navy and apply it to the now booming American economy. They knew how to repair batteries, but quickly realized that a better battery would be a more complete solution. They also realized early on that issues such as the health of the battery depended not so much on its engineering — although that was important — but in the chemistry of the battery itself.

In 1925 they set up what was to become a household name and the arrival of Trojan Battery.

The choice of name of the firm was not an obvious one. But one, nevertheless, that showed that the two partners were not just talented businessmen but had a quirky, even sentimental streak inside them.

Speer, who'd played lineman for the University of Southern California football team in 1916, loved the idea of adopting the team's mascot of the USC Trojan horse mascot named Traveler.

"Once that's been decided choosing a company colour was easy — it was inspired by the Cardinal colour from the USC Cardinal and Gold team colours. Trojan initially began by manufacturing automobile batteries. There weren't as many different sizes of batteries in that period, so Trojan made batteries for most models. They later moved into building batteries for commercial trucks.

But through the ups and downs of the tempestuous economic climate that characterized the 1930s the firm retained its focus on looking at ways of improving their basic product: the lead acid battery. The Eureka moment came in 1939 when Godber perfected a way to determine and maintain the proper electrolyte level in the cells of an electrical battery. His key patent (US 2242671) was granted in May 1941.

By this time, Godber's sons, Dick and Ray, had joined the company, ushering in the second generation of the family firm. Neither had any special training or electrical engineering degrees — though both attended University of California Los Angeles — and had experience working at Trojan during summer vacations.

Dick spent several years in the Navy before joining the company. Ray started his own auto parts business early on and when that struggled he then joined the company.

There was a kind of irony when Dick and Ray joined the firm. "Trojan was a USC thing yet they went to UCLA for college, USC's biggest rival," says Rick. "We finally got it right when my son Bryan and I both graduated from USC, with Bryan also obtaining his MBA from USC!"

The trigger for the arrival of Trojan as a major US battery firm came in the early 1950s with the development of Trojan's deep-cycle batteries. The catalyst was a dynamic businessman named Royce Seevers who had set up the Autoette Electric Car Company in Long Beach, Los Angeles.

Seevers had been asked to produce a vehicle for a physically challenged golfer, enabling him to play..."
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on the Thunderbird Country Club golf course, a celebrity haven in Palm Springs, California. The result was the Autoette Golfmobile. This was installed with specially made batteries from Trojan providing motive power to a converted 24-volt Dodge 1½ hp electric starter motor.

Trojan immediately realized the business opportunity to be seized in the electric golf car industry, and soon Trojan maroon batteries were powering golf cars on over 98% of the top golf courses in the US.

One of Trojan's first models was the J217. The “J” stood for Jumbo due to its size and the 217 was the 20 AH rating. This was built in a hard rubber case and used rubber and glass separators which were of the highest quality available at that time.

The pasting formula was developed with the help of Joe Orsino, a well known consultant of the time. It still forms the basis of the current pasting formula today with some tweaks and additives that have been added along the way that are patented. (The J217 changed to the company's most popular sized golf battery called the T105 in the early 1980s. It's an odd name in that it's also a nickname — the T stands for Trojan but the 105 was the 75 amp discharge rate in minutes which at the time depicted the average AH draw of an electric golf car.)

In the 1960s, the company expanded its line of deep-cycle batteries. The Godbers saw the way whole markets were about to move into such diverse electrically operated equipment such as forklifts, floor scrubbers and aerial work platforms.

They started contacting the OEMs in these markets and designing products to meet their needs. This pushed them into larger sized products along with their golf products such as Industrial Steel Tray batteries and taller models such as the L16 and J305 for boom lifts and floor scrubbers.

“Trojan's Industrial battery business at this time was focused on utilizing our proprietary pasting formula for longer cycle life. We also focused our efforts on the quality and craftsmanship of our manufacturing operation,” says Rick Godber. “This set the platform for the Trojan brand being noted for very high quality.”

One of the strangest characteristics of the lead acid battery business — where rivals look after their own — extends from coast to coast. East Penn, for example, has received (and given) help from its competitors during industry downturns and calamities. So too for Trojan when a fire in 1950 effectively could have shuttered the business.

In a show of support, the local battery manufacturers got together and supplied the Godber family with products until Trojan could get a new facility up and running. In 1968, Trojan moved to petroleum-rich Santa Fe Springs in Southern California, the last of such relocations.

Growth continued into the 1970s with the addition of batteries for floor machine, marine, construction and various industrial applications.

The firm's understanding of the importance of R&D, from its original patent application in 1939, developed during this period with its investment in Santa Fe Springs.

The result, says Trojan, is that several key innovative technologies have emerged which have made their deep-cycle batteries so successful.

In 1985 Trojan developed the MaxGuard Advanced Design Separator — making Trojan the only battery with this proprietary technology, designed to increase battery life and improve performance. The R&D for this was led by Rick Godber, Tom Tomkins, the vice president for manufacturing and the engineering department.

“We were looking for an alternative to the Permalife separator that was widely used in the golf car battery market in the early 80s,” says Rick Godber. “We felt the separator had a major impact on the overall life cycle performance of a deep cycle battery so we worked with Amerace (later to be known as Microporous) on several design chemistry until we found what we were looking for. The result was that we were able to double the cycle life with minimal cost increase. This helped Trojan obtain virtually 100% of the golf OEM business.”

By this time, Rick Godber (third generation) was president of Trojan Battery. Realising the way that the wind was blowing he put great emphasis on both R&D and the latest technology.

“During my tenure we added two new locations in Georgia besides the California operation. One through acquire-
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Don Beckley, executive vice president of engineering, Trojan has opened a new state-of-the-art factory in Sandersville, Georgia. Its main focus is on AGM products.

During the 1990s, Trojan faced several challenges in terms of enabling the business to grow further.

“Our aftermarket distribution was poor,” says Rick Godber. “Our solution was to seek out the top 13 or 14 battery specialists in the country and develop exclusive territories for them with our Trojan products. Led by Dave Godber, we established our Master Distributor programme in the US and Canada, and eventually expanded it globally. This has worked out well with a cohesive group focused on promoting the Trojan brand in the proper fashion. “Dave Godber has been extremely influential in establishing our Master Distributor programme over the past 14 years, and has extended this strategy to our very successful international endeavours.”

Dealing with competition — and particularly, the way competition has been carried out — has required extensive rethinking of investment strategies and branding.

“We had a large number of battery manufacturers playing in our niche, even though their products didn’t compare to Trojan’s in quality,” says Godber. “Their strategy in most cases was to look at our market as a loss leader so pricing was an issue. This had the long-term effect of shrinking the number of competitors in our markets.

“In the 90s, Trojan had virtually all the OEM golf business. Customers’ demands were high in terms of wanting engineering and technical support. This forced us to add a number of resources to support this aspect of the business. In the long run, this is what most differentiates Trojan now at the OEM level. We provide the infrastructure that our competitors don’t have to properly support the continuing design changes in the golf cars, and the field demands from a technical support aspect.”

Realizing that it lacked the resources to compete in offering starting and industrial forklift batteries, Trojan moved out of those markets in 1998 to concentrate on its deep cycle business.

In 1992, Trojan state-of-the-art research and development facility was set up in Santa Fe Springs, California. The year after it trademarked its branding. “Trojan maroon is now a symbol of
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quality, reliability and excellence in the battery industry. Since then, only genuine Trojan batteries come in the distinctive maroon case that makes them stand out from the rest," Godber says.

In 2004, Trojan developed a new line of spill-proof AGM maintenance-free batteries and the following year it launched its consumer Marine/RV brand.

Around that time Trojan's engineering team partnered with Southern California Edison, the US electric utility, to develop a maintenance solution reducing Trojan's energy consumption and CO₂ emissions by over 12 million pounds annually. Also, that year Trojan launched its Plus Series deep-cycle battery line and a new line of spill-proof deep-cycle Gel maintenance-free batteries.

In 2008, Trojan recognized the global shift to energy sources that are environmentally friendly and readily available worldwide, and introduced its RE Series line of deep-cycle batteries. "These deep-cycle batteries were specifically engineered to deliver unmatched life, durability and excellent charge efficiency in renewable energy applications such as solar/photovoltaic, small wind, and micro hydro," Godber says.

"Product innovation continued in 2009 with the launch of HydroLink, a single-point watering system for Trojan deep-cycle flooded batteries. HydroLink offers a faster, safer and easier method of battery watering for a wide range of applications."

As a result of the company's efforts in the renewable energy market segment, Trojan received the "Applica-