



Thermafiber, Inc. Manufacturer Serves as Insulation Leader

By Symone Salisbury

Company: Thermafiber, Inc.

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Telephone: (260) 563-2111

Web site: www.thermafiber.com

Management: Steve Edris, president; Mike Williams, executive vice president;
Austin Hess, market development analyst; and Eric Ryder, director of manufacturing

Employees: 140

What they do:

Thermafiber manufactures mineral wool products for the insulation industry. Recycled content comprises 80% of materials used in production at its 150,000-square-foot facility.

Production involves heating byproduct (known as slag or rock) from steel mills in a coke-fired furnace reaching up to 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The resulting product, molten lava, is then spun into fiber.

History:

Originally known as American Rockwool, the company opened its Wabash facility in 1934. It later became part of U.S. Gypsum, a name it held for almost 35 years. Since 1996, various private equity groups have bought and sold the company.

At one time, Thermafiber operated five plants throughout the country specializing in residential insulation. Consolidation led to a greater focus on commercial insulation at the Wabash facility.

Portfolio:

Supplying high-rise buildings is one of Thermafiber's specialties. Its insulation products are found, among other places, in the Sears Tower in Chicago, Petronas Twin Towers in Malaysia and the Burj Dubai tower in the United Arab Emirates (currently under construction, it will be the tallest building in the world).

Edris declares, "Another thing we're proud of is that our products were specified to go into 7 World Trade Center (the first building to be rebuilt after 9/11) and many of the other buildings around Ground Zero."

Thermafiber also supplied insulation to the Chase Tower (Indiana's tallest building) and Lucas Oil Stadium in downtown Indianapolis.

THERMAFIBER, INC.

Growth:

In the last five years, Thermafiber has doubled its sales revenue and maintained its status as an industry leader. Over 100 truckloads a week are shipped to domestic customers with more than 10% of the finished product ending up overseas.

Lean, green machine:

According to Edris, one pound of Thermafiber’s insulation saves 12 times the amount of energy in its first year as the energy used to produce it.

“At times when energy costs are so high, people are putting more insulation in their homes and buildings,” he observes. “The more insulation that goes into buildings, the less power required to cool or heat those buildings. We are in a roundabout way helping the environment.”

Moreover, Thermafiber implemented a recycling process six years ago that employs its own byproducts.

“A large portion of molten lava does not get converted to fiber and historically would go to an Indiana landfill,” Edris states. “Working with another group, we developed a way to recycle that.”

Conserving resources:

Efforts are underway at the plant to develop even more “green” business practices. An internal team, for example, is identifying additional ways to conserve water and energy.

“In the last 24 months, we’ve put a lot of resources into developing an environmental management system to completely eliminate storm water runoff from the plant,” Ryder remarks. “When it rains, we can (possibly) collect that water.”

He also foresees continued carbon emission reductions in the near future.

Additional protection:

The company’s manufacturing methods also offer cost-effective safety measures.

For instance, Thermafiber’s products can withstand twice the amount of heat as fiberglass. Edris contends that the tolerance for high temperatures could potentially save lives by providing individuals with more time to escape a burning building.

Rock and roll:

Custom manufacturing is another way Thermafiber caters to its clients.

“We’ll design a fiber for the customer and can put different facings on the exterior of insulation,” Edris comments. “No two buildings are the same.”

Products are either cut or packaged (in sheet or roll form) depending on the customer’s needs.



Production process: Thermafiber heats slag in a furnace, producing molten lava, which is spun into fiber and has a cotton candy-like texture. After treatment in a curing oven, the material can be cut into different shapes and sizes before being packaged for customers.



Director of manufacturing Eric Ryder points out some of the electronic controls, while president Steve Edris discusses the company's evolution.

Wired for sound:

Mineral wool insulation's high density maximizes sound control. The heightened level of privacy offers not only convenience to customers, but also can facilitate workplace practices.

"With the HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) laws, you don't want conversations to be overheard in doctor's offices, hospitals (and similar settings)," Edris emphasizes.

Tiles and tomatoes:

Expanding the ceiling tile business is one of Edris' goals. In addition to helping manage sound, another interesting use for Thermafiber products is growing tomatoes.

"It (slag) is rock base in a fibrous form, so it is basically the chemistry of dirt," Edris points out.

New opportunities:

Edris describes the last 12 years as times of "somewhat constant change" with several acquisitions of Thermafiber taking place, including one last July.

"A lot of our activities (since the most recent acquisition) have been on growth," he explains. "How do we improve our facility here? How can we grow the footprint of the company? This new ownership group is putting money back into the company so we have some neat things going on."

Possibilities include expanding in Indiana and elsewhere nationally.

Over the years, Thermafiber has transformed challenges into opportunities.

"We were part of a Fortune 500 company and became a small business when they (U.S. Gypsum) sold us," Edris recalls. "We had to learn how to survive and improved during those changes. As a small business, we've been quite successful with the constant change."

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