

Dorell Juvenile is best known for its top-rated car seats made in Columbus.



DOREL JUVENILE

'Protecting the Most Innocent Among Us'

Address: 2525 State Street, Columbus, IN 47201

Phone: (812) 372-0141

Website: www.doreljuvenile.com

Employees: Just under 500 in Columbus (700 in U.S.)

Resource: Jose Garcia, plant manager/general manager

By Anthony Schoettle

Dorel Juvenile's Columbus operation isn't just another factory. Its employees are making products that could – and often do – save the lives of countless children.

"There's an acute awareness here, we're not making widgets," relates Jose Garcia, Dorel's Columbus plant manager. "At the end of the day, the employees go home knowing that, 'Hey, I made a difference. Today, perhaps the product I worked on is going to save somebody's life.' This is really something that drives people here."

Dorel, which acquired Columbus-based Cosco in 1988, makes a variety of products, including its well-known and top-rated children's car seats. Dorel Juvenile is one of two primary divisions – along with its home division – of Montreal-based Dorel Industries in southeastern Canada.

The car seats, which are sold nationwide through outlets such as Kohls, Target, Nordstrom, Wal-Mart, Amazon and smaller shops, represent approximately 40% of the company's U.S. sales and are designed and produced in Columbus alongside other juvenile products like play yards, strollers, walkers, highchairs, safety products and infant health items. While the U.S. is a top market for Dorel, it's also strengthening in Europe and Latin America.

Employees reaching out

It's not just the products made at Dorel's Columbus plant that are special. This is a place where customers can stop by and an employee – or even more than one – will stop what they're doing and show the parent or guardian how to properly place and strap their child into the car seat. Employees also regularly go to community events not only to show off the company's wares but to make sure they are being used in a way that could save a child from serious injury or even death in case of an auto accident.

"What we're doing here is so vital," Garcia expresses. "If you don't feel that way and aren't willing to go above and beyond to ensure the safety and well-being of a child, you shouldn't be here."

Dorel employees in Columbus who have a birth in their family are gifted a car seat by the organization.

"What's really cool is ... you would think that everybody would want to go after the high-priced car seat,

but these folks who are working on the line, they want the car seat that was made on the line they work on. That's the pride and confidence they have in what they do," Garcia says.

Dorel's facility has a decidedly warm feel. For instance, the Star Board is a display that hangs prominently. It is full of parents' and guardians' testimonials about how a Dorel car seat saved their child.

"We keep at the top of our minds that our customer is really the child," Garcia emphasizes. "That's the one we have to protect. It's our responsibility, our stewardship, to protect that child. The child gets picked up, set in it, strapped in, and for them, they don't have a choice whether their parents buy an entry price point, a mid-tier price point, or a \$400 car seat. We have to protect that kid in the \$69 car seat just as well as we're protecting the kid in the \$400 car seat. So to me, it is just a culture here of caring about children.

"There is nothing I can think of that is more important than protecting the most innocent of those among us."

In addition to the care it takes in making its products, Dorel Juvenile supports various charities, including Safe Kids Worldwide, Make-A-Wish Foundation, Room to Grow and the local Bartholomew County DARE and Fraternal Order of Police's Shop with a Cop programs. Its involvement often focuses on child safety and helping families, with initiatives like car-seat safety checks and donations of baby essentials.

It's not surprising the Columbus operation is so involved in local causes. Cosco was heavily involved in the community since its founding – as the Columbus Specialty Company in 1935 – and Dorel has continued that legacy.

More than production

Dorel does more than manufacturing in Columbus. It has its research and design center there – handling all the design work for the car seat "from the ground up," according to Garcia.

The company also does government regulation and industry standard compliance testing at the Indiana plant. "We have a sled (simulated crash) lab with three sled (devices) on site," Garcia explains.

What's more, the organization has a massive distribution operation in Columbus. "It's an entirely vertically integrated product operation," he offers.

That fact is one reason Garcia was attracted to come to work for Dorel in 2017. He credits it for a great deal of the success the company and the Columbus plant have had.

Much of Dorel's market performance, however, is tied to birth rate, and the birth



Dorel Juvenile workers do more than manufacture. They also do research and development, design work and safety testing.



rate in the past decade-plus is down. Still, Dorel Juvenile continues to see year-over-year gains. To keep growing, Dorel Juvenile has fought for more market share and continues to add features to its products – notably its car seats – for which customers are willing to pay a bit more.

"I was working in the automotive field before (I came to Dorel), and one of my frustrations working in automotive was the design guys were in (one location) and then we were trying to launch products (at another location)," Garcia recalls. "And there's always this disconnect and these delays going back and forth."

"When I was interviewing (with Dorel), I'm like, 'Oh, your design folks are right on site. That's fantastic'. If you have an issue, go grab 'em. And they come out to the line and

they can see it, and we have a resolution within a few minutes. Then having them here while we're developing it, we're going to insert (our design team) into the development process and put as much manufacturing intelligence into the design as possible.

"When you do that, you end up with a much more elegant, robust design that's going to function a lot better, ultimately be much more economical and be better for the consumer."

One more thing about Dorel's massive 1.2-million-square-foot Columbus facility: It's been converted into a zero-landfill operation that recycles more than 99% of its plastic manufacturing waste.

Promoting from within

Garcia says Dorel has no problem finding the talent it needs in Indiana to keep



The Dorel operation in Columbus has a decidedly warm feel. It's a place customers can call – or even stop in – and get personal assistance with a purchase.

its plant humming.

“Columbus is a very competitive market for technical skills and labor,” he stresses. “So, one of the things we do is first off, we provide the product that makes a difference. That gets people in the door.”

Once the talent is there, Dorel often promotes from within.

“We can provide career paths for everybody,” Garcia continues. “We try to provide a career roadmap for folks that they can advance their careers, make more money and help their families out. And I think doing that makes us sticky. People know, ‘I can come here as an operator, work my way up to a utility operator, become a team lead, become a supervisor and manager.’ Within my team, we’ve got people who have been here for over 30 years on the management

staff who have followed that path. So, there’s a lot of opportunity here for folks who have ambition and want to work.”

As a result, Garcia notes, his workforce is second to none.

“The team here is extremely conscientious of the product we’re making. The second part is that they’re driven to get better and better. We’ve got a lot of experience throughout the factory. Our manufacturing director has 45 years of experience making car seats. Our supervisors have been here for 10-plus years, and they’ve come up through the ranks. I can’t say enough good things about the employees we have here.”

Looking ahead

Given its success and reputation in the market, it would be easy for Dorel Juvenile –

and its employees – to rest on their laurels.

Garcia and his team have no such intentions. In the near term, Dorel Juvenile officials plan to bolster the firm’s profile – and distribution – to capitalize on the current trend by domestic retailers to seek American-made goods.

“Some of our customers are having campaigns to push the Made in America product, and right now we’re wanting to take full advantage of that,” Garcia offers.

No detail is getting overlooked.

“We must continue to provide the product to our customers on time and in the right quantity, with everything looking perfect in the box. Of course, the function is critical ... but we want to make sure there’s a fit. The colors must match, even the colors on the boxes and the labels that we’re providing to them (have to be) correct and legible. So, there’s just (an emphasis on) really trying to take advantage of providing excellent product out to the market right now,” Garcia stresses.

Longer term, Garcia is looking to add more automation – and other technologies – to operations in Columbus.

“We started to build our own automation (on the factory floor). We’re trying to make sure we are ready for a lot of the challenges that are ahead so we can be cost competitive,” he imparts.

Garcia emphasizes that added automation won’t impact employment at the facility.

“We have plenty of work here for our people to do,” Garcia notes. “Automation merely provides an efficiency boost. It won’t impact anyone’s employment. It’s just a part of our efforts to continually improve.” ■



At its Columbus plant, Dorel Juvenile produces a variety of child-related products that are shipped globally.