

Industry Trends

Behind the Scenes of American Excelsior's Pivot from Pandemic Response to a Record-breaking Quarter

Lindsay Gilder | Jan 12, 2021 | Share: [in](#) [f](#) [t](#) [✉](#)

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This article is sponsored by [American Excelsior Company](#), a custom manufacturer of flexible foam, wood fiber, and erosion control products.

If you asked Ken Starrett, [vice president of sales and marketing at American Excelsior](#), last March [how he thought the business would perform in 2020](#), he'd probably give a pretty different answer than today.

In just a few short months after COVID-19 hit the U.S., American Excelsior went from handling a significant slowdown within their U.S.-based flexible foam plants to landing record-breaking sales that far exceeded any of the company's previous sales years throughout its 133-year history.

What was their secret?

"Product diversity and having multiple plants has helped us get through these challenges better than many of our competitors," Starrett explains.

But American Excelsior didn't learn how to be versatile in the face of business-threatening challenges overnight. Each of [American Excelsior's](#) three divisions, including Flexible Foam, Wood Fiber, and Erosion Control, was developed in response to growing demand and changing sourcing activity trends throughout the company's history.

Thomas Insights sat down with Starrett, who has now been with the company for 50 years, to get a look behind the scenes of how the company's Flexible Foam operations became so successful — even during a global pandemic.

Q: What sets American Excelsior apart from the competition?

Ken Starrett (KS): "One of the major differentiating factors of our Flexible Foam Division is that American Excelsior has five fabricating locations throughout the United States. Many of our competitors just have single-source facilities, but having multiple locations allows our customers to have peace of mind that their order won't be delayed.

In case of any natural disasters or disruption in business, we're able to move that production to another location. It also increases our buying power by having several locations throughout the country.

With American Excelsior's long history, we were one of the first companies to get into the flexible foam business. We started fabricating and processing way back in the 50s, so we've had a lot of time to get it right. With that much time invested, we were able to develop a very knowledgeable staff with a tremendous amount of experience.

Lastly, by having such a wide variety of flexible foams — from urethanes to esthers to polyethylenes to crosslinks — we're able to fit the right product to the right application instead of trying to match the application to the products we sell.

We supply products to major firms like Boeing Corporation and Lockheed Martin, which speaks to the name we've built for ourselves in the industry.

Our flexible foam products are used for packaging, medical products, furniture, bedding, marine, automotive, recreational, and hundreds more. We want our customers to call us anytime they need a product to add comfort, protection, or cushioning."

Q: How do you measure success at American Excelsior?

KS: "Success is measured in working conditions.

Our company is driven by management, from the president all the way down. We're not a stuffed-shirt type of business where everything's mechanical. We've got a personality to our company. Many of us, including the president, came up through the ranks so we understand the associates at every level because we came through that ourselves.

Using myself as an example, I started off fabricating foam in a plant in Cincinnati and have worked my way up the ranks in various positions on the plant floor, inside sales, outside sales, and then management with my current position as vice president of sales and marketing. I recently just celebrated 50 years at the company myself.

The business is personal to everyone who works here. Executive management is on a first-name basis with most of our 430 associates across all of our plants."

Q: What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the industry today, and how is American Excelsior working to overcome it?

KS: "When COVID hit, out of the three divisions, our Flexible Foam division took the biggest hit.

As an example, some of larger customers produce commercial seating products that are often used in offices and airports. When business and travel restrictions started being implemented across the country, some of those customers took direct hits in their supply chains. Needless to say, even today, airports and colleges aren't spending a lot of money on new furniture.

However, once we saw the slowdown, we saw our medical product sales start to escalate so we turned our attention to ways to further enhance that growth. One of the new products we developed in response was foam cushion strips with PSA adhesive, which could be supplied to those manufacturing plastic face shields.

We then hooked up to [Thomas' COVID-19 Resource Hub](#) as a COVID-19 Response Supplier, along with other marketing outlets, as people were scrambling to meet demands for face shields. We knew that we needed to move quickly to reach those in need. With five locations capable of producing this product, once we jumped in and started producing these strips there were times when we were shipping more than 500,000 pieces a week.

Like many people, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of our associates were nervous coming to work, but we found later that many of them found comfort in the fact that many of the products they were producing were being used to battle the pandemic.

Now, even as bad as things are around the country, ironically all three divisions right now are breaking records. It's crazy. We didn't expect this whatsoever. We had a record month last month for all three divisions. We're on pace to have another record for all three divisions this month."

Q: What are the most common questions you get from prospective clients and customers, and how do you respond?

KS: "A lot of people ask if we have engineering capabilities in [our flexible foam division](#); It's not that they're looking to get a better price than what they're buying. They may be looking to develop a new product or improve the performance of a current part, but they don't know exactly how to tackle the challenge so they come to us asking if we've got resources to help solve their needs.

And we can absolutely do that; That's why we've had so much success in our reputation behind us. With five locations across the country, our products and our people are always close at hand. We believe in getting good people in the company, training them, and giving them the opportunity to advance in the company. I think that part of American Excelsior's success has definitely been driven by the people, our associates, and the expertise that they carry with them. And that is one of the reasons why you see the tremendous longevity at American Excelsior."

Explore American Excelsior's Flexible Foam Capabilities

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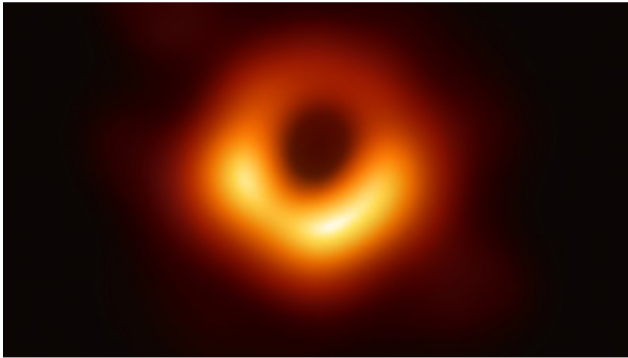
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