Westfall Technik Growth Impacts CPG and Medical Markets

Ex-Nypro CEO Brian Jones is building a molding juggernaut, and he's just getting started

By Robert Grace

Brian Jones likes to shake things up. He did a lot of that when he was at Nypro Inc. The Clinton, Mass.-based company became the first custom molder to rack up $1 billion in sales in 2006, the year he departed as president and CEO.

Several years later he was retained on a consulting basis by multibillion-dollar global contract manufacturer Flextronics. While there, Jones worked quietly with Mark Gomulka, a former Nypro colleague, to build Flex's Precision Plastics unit via strategic acquisitions of molding and toolmaking firms.

Mark Gomulka, COO

Jones oversaw purchases ranging from Tech Mold Inc. in Arizona and the former Courtesy Tool moldmaking operations in Buffalo Grove, Ill., to businesses in Denmark, Switzerland and Spain, leading to an operation with some $1.3 billion in sales. Gomulka, as vice president of operations, was charged with integrating all the acquired businesses into the Flex portfolio.

In October 2017, Jones jumped fully back into the fray, striking out on his own to launch Westfall Technik Inc. with a master plan to upend the medical plastics and consumer packaged goods (CPG) sectors. Now, in just under three-and-a-half years, Westfall Technik of Las Vegas has acquired or launched some 18 businesses in North America, with many more deals in the works. And Jones and his team have their eyes set on expanding into Europe.

As of mid-March, Westfall Technik was preparing to open the latest of several cleanroom molding sites, this one in Antioch, Ill., near Chicago. That 30,000-square-foot former MGS Manufacturing Group Inc. facility (two-thirds of which is cleanroom

Brian Jones, CEO and founder, Westfall Technik

space) eventually is expected to house about 30 all-electric injection presses. Gomulka—who rejoined Jones in January 2020 and now serves as Westfall's chief operating officer—describes the Antioch venture as a "build it and they will come" scenario because of the current strong demand for medical molding space.

Bulking Up Quickly

Westfall counts more than 350 injection molding presses in its stable companywide, and Jones said it is adding six to seven new presses every month. In aggregate, the firm, with some 2,000 employees, already ranks among the 50 largest injection molders and 20 largest moldmakers in North America.

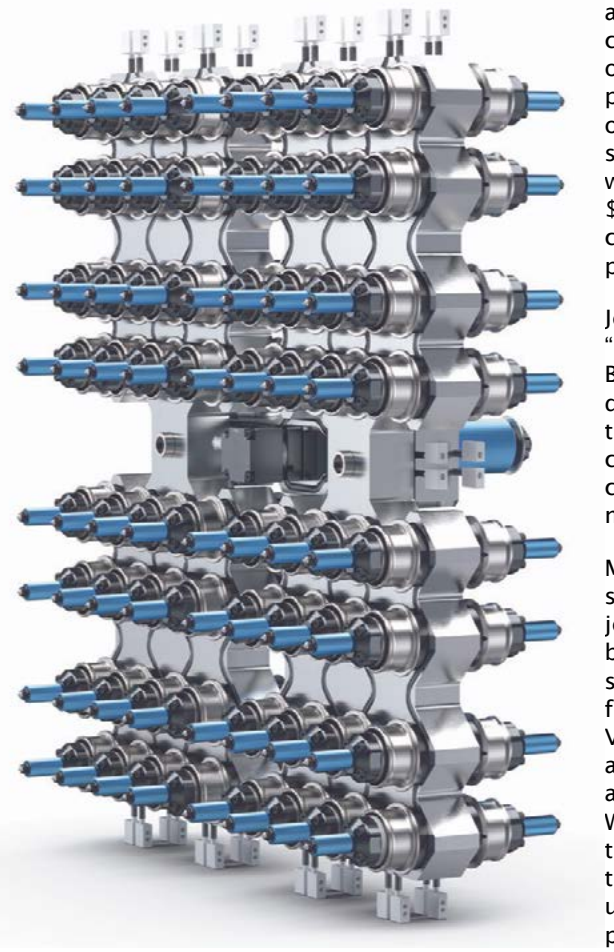
Jones, 66 years old, claims his young firm is also the only custom molder that has both its own injection molding machine—an all-electric, micromolding unit called the M3—and its own hot-runner system. Westfall acquired both when it bought Ontario, Canada-based Mold Hotrunner Solutions (MHS) Inc. in December 2018. Westfall now has multiple M3 machines in the U.S., Mexico and Europe.

"I come at it from a technology standpoint," he explained in a Mar. 2 telephone interview. "I never want to go into any project that I'm quoting without a competitive advantage. Ever. I don't like being commoditized. So, the best way to do that is to bring a unique technology to fore. That's what we did."

As for the M3 machine, which MHS designed for prototype and high-volume production, Jones says it boasts numerous innovative features that separate it from the pack. It has magnetic clamps that offer the ultimate in mold safety and a resolution of 10 microns which means it can detect a hair in the mold parting line. It features secure data connectivity via the OPC machine protocol to cloud-based Industry 4.0 solutions, and a free-fall cycle time of 2.5 seconds. The machine also has an integrated robot inside the machine that does part separation. You don't put the M3 in a cleanroom, Jones states; "the machine itself is a clean room."

The M3 machine makes tiny medical parts—so small that you could put 1,000 pieces on your fingernail, Jones claims. If they were to be dropped on the floor, they would look like dust. Using that technology, he adds, Westfall can micromold without waste highly engineered materials such as bio-absorbable resins. "We've been successfully designing and molding parts from PEEK (polyetheretherketone), PLA (polylactic acid) and POM (polyoxymethylene), all while solving the consistent challenges of residence time with a unique process."

Micromolding machines are defined by how small a micro part they can mold (in weight) while retaining the polymer properties and a consistent part quality. The true micromolding challenge is melt residence. The ultimate solution is a direct-gated micro part without cold-runner waste that weighs less than 10 milligrams. The M3-D08 machine, for example, features eight direct valve gates that can produce up to 100 million micro parts per year without waste. The micro capability, notes Williams, "is in the process, the quality and quantity, not in machine size."



Westfall boasts an array of advanced in-house technology, including this 64x64 MHS hot-runner system. All photos courtesy of Westfall Technik

Merritt Williams, chief sales and marketing officer, Westfall Technik

Having your own hot-runner system in-house is also a major advantage, says Jones. "We're able to build the tool much cheaper, and quicker" as a result. A hot-runner system can account for up to a third of the cost of a high-cavitation packaging mold. By having its own in-house technology, Jones says that for a 48-cavity mold, with a typical price tag of about $500,000, Westfall Technik can slash the cost by nearly 20 percent, and build it faster.

Jones calls this Westfall's "stacked integration model." By offering everything from design to prototyping to tooling to commercial production, the company aims to give the OEM customer a cost and speed-to-market advantage.

Merritt Williams, Westfall's chief sales and marketing officer, joined the firm in January 2020, bringing years of healthcare sector experience with him. The former Freudenberg Medical VP says of Westfall's strategic approach: "Brian wanted to get to a single point of accountability. We put ourselves in a position to own the lifecycle of all those parts." When one stacks up all those aspects (design, prototyping, tooling, molding), "the value—not only for Westfall, but more importantly for the customer—is exponential."

Recycling Is in the Sights

Westfall is not done building out this model. "We've bid to buy recycling companies," Jones said. "We have not got one yet. But we've been in the bidding on multiple recycled-material companies. Once again, we're trying to integrate the whole thing. Because what good does it do if you design a closure to use recycled material, but then you don't have availability of material? You're not going to convert a major CPG product without ensuring the supply of material."

Jones sees a lot of innovative recycling technology emerging in the medical products sector. "We want to be a first mover in that. We also want to have some unique technology, as well. Recycling medical material [involves going] back to formulation, back to the molecule."

Underscoring its commitment to this area, Westfall in April 2019 hired Allison Lin away from Coca-Cola Co. where she oversaw global sustainable procurement operations. She was named vice president of procurement and sustainability, a first at Westfall. Lin previously had similar roles for Starbucks and Procter & Gamble. "It says a lot that she wanted to come to our little company when she was working with Coke," Jones said. "That's a big deal."

Last summer, Westfall announced it was collaborating with a Pittsburgh-based firm called Polycarbin, described as "a software-enabled biomedical plastics recycling company that has developed a method for diverting single-use scientific plastics from landfills and incinerators

The M3 all-electric, precision micromolding machine makes microscopic medical parts with virtually no waste.

Can't Tell the Player Without a Program

Assets Acquired or Launched	HQ Location	Primary Activity	Date of Deal
Integrity Mold Inc.	Tempe, Ariz.	Molding	10/18/2017
Fairway Injection Molds Inc.	Walnut, Calif.	Tooling	10/18/2017
10 Day Parts Inc. (formerly Advanced Technology Inc.)	Corona, Calif.	Tooling & prototyping	1/26/2018
Elfy's Inc.	Hayward, Calif.	Molding & prototyping	2/5/2018
Started Inceptive Design Group	Costa Mesa, Calif.	Design	3/1/2018
AMS Plastics Inc. (plus AMS' Operaciones de Clase Mundial SA de CV maquiladora in Tijuana, Mexico)	El Cajon, Calif.	Molding	3/23/2018
AMA Plastics Inc.	Riverside, Calif.	Molding	4/16/2018
NPI/Medical	Ansonia, Conn.	Molding	5/2/2018
Amaray North America	Elizabethtown, Ky.	Molding	10/3/2018
Extreme Tool & Engineering Inc.	Wakefield, Mich.	Tooling	10/18/2018
Mold Hotrunner Solutions Inc. (MHS) *	Georgetown, Ont.	Tooling	12/19/2018
Mold Craft Inc.	Willernie, Minn.	Tooling	1/15/2019
Precision Injection Molding Co. (PIMCO)	Corona, Calif.	Molding	2/22/2019
Micro Tech Southwest Inc.	Tempe, Ariz.	Molder	3/20/2019
Delta Pacific Products	Union City, Calif.	Molding	4/30/2019
Prism Plastics Products Inc. **	New Richmond, Wis.	Molding	4/30/2019
NxTBio Technologies **	Claremont, Calif.	Molding	4/30/2019
Former MGS Mfg. Group Inc. plant	Antioch, Ill.	Molding	2/22/2021

* MHS deal included rights to M3 micromolding machine and in-house hot-runner technology
** Wholly owned subsidiaries of Delta Pacific

The Westfall Technik facility in Riverside, Calif., was acquired from AMA Plastics in 2018.

and recycling it back into the hands of scientists and clinicians as circular economy products."

Lin stated at the time: "We have achieved up to 100 percent recycled-content inclusion levels for our customers in the consumer products goods and food and beverage areas, and with this partnership will be the first company to introduce recycled content in the life science and biomedical space."

Using a system that leverages low-cost, front-end segregation and a waste analytics platform, Polycarbin says it is positioned to capture and repurpose valuable scientific plastics. The firm's services are said to provide more cost-effective and environmentally responsible waste management solutions to research labs, biopharma and clinical labs while closing the loop on the biomedical plastics life cycle. Through this venture, Westfall states it will be able to offer customers "the first opportunity to buy laboratory products with circular economy (recycled) plastics with consistent quality through its NxtBio line of life science and biomedical supplies, as well as products made for brand owners."

Partnering on Closure

Westfall Technik also is a U.S. partner of Universal Closures Ltd., a small design shop in London that focuses on developing more sustainable, innovative closures. "We're on ramp with about 15 different platform products" with UCL, Jones said. Westfall's aim is to take UCL's technology and build high-output tools while always striving to improve on sustainability, such as by redesigning three-piece closures into single-piece parts. As for tamper evidence, the closure that Westfall designed with UCL eliminates the need to peel off a separate heat-seal foil piece under the cap, Jones noted.

"The tamper evidence is designed into the cap," he said. "So, you're eliminating the process, you're eliminating parts. We worked very hard to reduce the amount of material and get it to be sustainable material."

As for its stacked integration model, Jones claimed Westfall's approach offers huge benefits for OEMs. "All they have to do is work with us, push the button and we do it all. Whereas in the past, the OEM had to independently contract all that stuff. There was never one single point of authority and accountability."

That involved placing a purchase order for a design, then putting out a PO for a prototyper to get some samples, and so on and so on. "It's all independently sequenced," Jones said. "It's a lot of management, and it's very time consuming. When OEMs try to do it, it usually takes 24 to 36 months to get through that process.

"I saw the opportunity, if we could do it all, to collapse that time dramatically—like, less than half the time to help people get to market quicker. COVID vaccines getting to market quickly is a perfect example of trying to do that. In that case, there's the pressure of life and death. But in a branded product it's the pressure of market competition."

Williams, in a Mar. 8 telephone interview together with Gomulka, stressed the importance of Westfall's flat structure and overall management approach, as well.

"Our business practice is a disruptor, too. How easy are you to do business with? How nimble are you to do business with? How bureaucratic are you to do business with? We talk frequently about getting politics and bureaucracy out of our system," Williams explained, "because [they are] a major time suck that builds silos that benefit no one. And ultimately, the customer pays for it."

Instead, he added, customers frequently comment on how quickly Westfall can make decisions, issue job quotes and get things done.

At Westfall, "there's not a consumer team, and a healthcare team and a tooling team. There's one team," Williams stated. "When you align everyone's goals, it's amazing what you can get done. Then put in accountability around it. It's been amazing what we've been able to turn around. We got silos out of the system. The stacked integration model is critical, but the operational mentality under 'One Westfall' has been an equal component to our rapid success."

Location, Location

Jones also believes in having facilities close to customers. "Proximity really counts, even for the medical companies. I bought companies in the Twin Cities, Silicon Valley, Southern California, New England and so on. Those are all medical hubs." And now the firm is opening the Chicagoland facility.

Westfall Technik recently opened a cleanroom in Union City, Calif., just south of Oakland, on the east bay. "We bought a nice company there in December 2018, doing medical and surgical devices. We decided to put a cleanroom in there. There was a lot of demand and not a lot of capacity. We got it sold out.

"We have commitments for 14 all-electric presses in Union City. That's producing an OEM's five-minute, at-home COVID saliva test kit. We wanted to be able to help them scale up to full production. So, we built a new cleanroom in Riverside [Calif.] in the second quarter of 2020 and filled that up by Thanksgiving."

Westfall is building yet another cleanroom in the area, "and that'll be filled before we finish it, which will be by the end of April."

> "When you align everyone's goals, it's amazing what you can get done.

"We have about 180 molds coming on-line right now that are all on the project management list. That's a lot," Jones said. "One of them, a machine running closure molds, will do about $2 million in sales. Sales are going to go up dynamically. We built a good company, I think."

Asked if he has visions of surpassing the $1 billion sales mark at his old firm, Nypro, Jones doesn't hesitate. "I plan to do a lot more than that, actually. I don't see why not, you know. It's there."

All Eyes on Europe

The company's next frontier is Europe. Jones named his current company after the Westphalia region of Germany and then chose "Technik," German for technology, all out of a reverence for the advanced manufacturing concepts that emerge from that area.

Westfall plans to be targeted in its approach to tackling Europe, according to Gomulka. "We will not go to Europe and do 18 acquisitions in 18 months. It's not going to happen. Rather, we're going to pick the technology platforms that are going to drive our company to the next level. We're looking at micromolding and liquid silicone rubber, as well as precision tool builders."

Jones added: "I have the companies identified—great companies, great people. The industry is at that point where a lot of the guys who built these great companies are all sort of timing out. I'm an old guy, I know how to connect with them. I know what their values are about. Most of them, especially in Europe, are family businesses. You just have to approach it differently. You can't be an idiot American when you go to Europe, that's all. Try not to be an idiot, and pretend you've been once around the world. That's the next phase in the company, I think."

As Westfall looks to the future, Jones sees "Switzerland, Austria, Germany, even France, there's opportunity for us there. All of that is really dynamic. Maybe Portugal, too. I have my eye on three or four businesses in Portugal to put together.

"All the things I wish I could have done in the old company, I get to do now, because it's my company."

Buckle up, it's going to be a wild ride.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Grace is a writer, editor and marketing communications professional who has been active in B2B journalism since 1980. He was founding editor of and worked for 25 years at Plastics News, serving as editorial director, associate publisher and conference director. He is now both editor of SPE's *Journal of Blow Molding* and a regular contributor to various outlets. A long-time member of the Industrial Designers Society of America, he runs his own firm, RC Grace LLC, in Daytona Beach, Fla., and can be contacted at bob@rcgrace.com.