

FOAM ALONE

Latex International bounces back from blaze to top of class

By **ROB VARNON**
 rvarnon@ctpost.com

After following Michael Lorelli, Latex International chief executive officer and president, on a fast-paced, enthusiastic tour of his factory — packed with work and robots — a visitor half-expected him to jump on the bed in the company's showroom instead of lying on it.

Lorelli, a veteran corporate executive, has been in charge of Shelton-based Latex for a little more than a year, and he said there are amazing things happening at the company.

"It's a fun story to tell," Lorelli said.

Since he came on board, the company has added a research and development department that is working on new materials to create better mattresses and pillows, expanded beyond its 200,000-square-foot facility on River Road into a second building in Connecticut and two factories in other states and added more robotics to the Connecticut production process.

All less than five years after a fire destroyed the company's primary factory in Ansonia.

Lorelli credited Latex International's employees with the resurgence in the company's fortunes so soon after the blaze.

► Please see **LATEX** on F3



Phil Noel/Connecticut Post

Looking up: Latex International CEO and President Michael Lorelli relaxes on a foam mattress manufactured at the company's Shelton facility. Latex sells its foam cores to seven of the world's best-known mattress makers.



Connecticut Post file photo

Tougher times:

A fire destroyed Latex's factory in Ansonia in 2001. The company has since reinvented itself and outfitted a brand-new factory with state-of-the-art equipment. The company employs 125 people in Connecticut and has factories in California and Georgia. It also has an international sales force.

Latex Industries selling pillows

Continued from F1

The company employs 125 people in Connecticut and runs three shifts, Lorelli said. It also has opened factories in California and Georgia. With an international sales force, the company employs more than 300.

A privately held company, Latex doesn't divulge its sales figures, but, according to Lorelli, its five biggest customers have increased their use of latex materials 250 percent in the past two years.

In a strange way, the fire may have helped the company grow.

"The fire was one of the best things that happened," Lorelli said, adding the caveat that it was a traumatic event. But from that disaster the company was able to reinvent itself and outfit a brand-new factory with state-of-the-art equipment, he said.

Morgan Russell, chairman of the Fairfield County chapter of the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, and Jim Savage, chairman-elect of the New Haven SME chapter, took a tour of the

Latex plant about a year ago and were enthusiastic about the new technology the company is using.

"I was very, very impressed with Latex," Russell said. "They had their act together."

Savage said Latex's operation shows Connecticut manufacturers can turn to automation and technology to help them prosper and create meaningful work.

"Automation really takes a lot of the human error out of this" and allows companies to put employees' skills to

better use instead of handling repetitive work, Savage said.

"It's nice to see manufacturing companies in Connecticut that are prosperous and coming up with new ideas," Savage said.

A lot of the new technology Latex uses involves robots and centers on "Big Foot," the mythical creature that supposedly wanders the American wilderness.

In Lorelli's office there is a photograph of Big Foot to honor Latex's next big addition to the factory: a new machine called Big Foot that can create long sheets of foam used for pillow-top mattresses, he said.

The machine is being installed and will require only four people to do a job that would have taken six.

When Big Foot starts work, it won't be alone — other robots are already busy making a variety of mattresses.

Workers used to fill the mattress molds with batter using a hose, but robots do it automatically while a technician watches and sets the production run on a computer.

The robot is basically an arm with a hose attached to it. It moves up and down the production line on an overhead runner and swings the arm so it can pour the batter into the molds. The molds, which are referred to as waffle irons, close automatically and heat up. In a few minutes, workers can peel the finished foam core off the mold and send it to another spot in the factory, where it will be cut to size.

Kevin Stein, Latex's vice president of marketing, said the foam can be made very stiff or soft, depending on what type of mattress it goes into.

Latex sells its cores to seven of the world's best-known mattress makers, including Sealy, Simmons and Serta.

The company, like other manufacturers, is facing double-digit price increases because of higher energy costs, Stein said. But Latex has been able to pass those costs on to customers.

Stein is fairly new to Latex. He came from Staples International a few years ago, jumping into the mattress business in part because it gave him an opportunity to build a marketing division almost from the ground up, he said.

But he also joined the team because the company helps people by improving the beds in which they sleep.

"It's easy to get up in the morning," because he's going to a job that can help people sleep better, Stein said.

In addition to investing in research, the company tests its products with advanced equipment, including a machine that can gauge the distribution of weight across the mattress to show how foams help disperse weight more evenly. That should help eliminate pressure points, Stein said.

And while Latex doesn't sell mattresses under its own brand, it sells its own pillows. Stein and Lorelli said the company started advertising in a few airline magazines this year and probably will sell the pillows in stores this holiday season.

Lorelli said that as a young man he dreamed of leading General Motors or becoming a pilot. But today the idea of leading a huge company built by so many other leaders doesn't appear to interest him.

"It's all about building a company," Lorelli said. "That's what I live and die for."

For more information on Latex International, visit www.latexfoam.com.

Rob Varnon, who covers business, can be reached at 330-6216.