

## Sticking power: Resin-maker Alpha Corporation marks 50th anniversary with new headquarters in Piperton

By Tom Bailey Jr.

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There's a reason AOC's new world headquarters in Piperton is a sleekly angled structure of tinted glass and steel.

"Our tag line is, 'World Leader in Resin Technology,'" chairman and CEO Randall A. Weghorst said. "So we wanted a technology sort of look."

AOC, the flagship business of The Alpha Corporation, makes the resins, as well as gel coats, colorants and additives, customers use to manufacture many things, from pipe to boats, bowling balls to countertops, bathtubs to vehicle-body panels. It's North America's largest maker of a family of high-performance plastics called unsaturated polyester resins.

Weghorst likens the look and feel of the thousands of different resins AOC develops and manufactures to taffy.

The company itself has taffy's sticking power: Alpha Corp. late last month celebrated its 50th anniversary.

The company employs about 210 people total in Piperton, including 65 in the 50,000-square-foot new headquarters, and 145 down the hill and across Tenn. 57 in manufacturing and R&D.

Worldwide, AOC employs more than 500 in 12 facilities in nine countries.

AOC went global in 1994 when it expanded into Canada. Mexico followed in 1997, followed by expansions to the United Kingdom in 1998 and 2001, Thailand in 2002, the Czech Republic in 2005, Poland in 2007 and India last year. It also has a facility in Vietnam.

AOC is still looking to grow in South America, China, Indonesia and Central Europe.

The company is not outsourcing, Weghorst points out, but making resins on location for customers there to use. Transportation costs would be too high to make resins overseas and ship them back to the United States, he said.

Closely tied to manufacturing, housing, construction and automobile sales, AOC is virtually a leading economic indicator.

The privately held company recorded about \$600 million in sales in 2007, just before the recession hit, Weghorst said. Sales this year are nearly \$400 million.

Like the economy, AOC's business is rebounding in a deliberate way. "It hit bottom and it's starting to slowly grow," he said.

The company has five decades' worth of experience with recessions and growth periods.

"We've always gone down quicker, but come back quicker than the general economy," Weghorst said.

Through thick and thin, Alpha Corp. has stayed grounded in West Tennessee since 1960 when its late founder, William 'Bill' D. Watkins, arrived in Memphis to establish the company.

"Building the new headquarters here reaffirms our commitment to the future of West Tennessee," president and CEO Fred Norman said in a company release.

The company was seven years old when Mr. McGuire famously whispered to Ben the one-word career advice in the 1967 classic "The Graduate."

Mr. McGuire: "Plastics."

*Ben: "Exactly how do you mean?"*

Mr. McGuire: "There's a great future in plastics."

In his own way, Weghorst still echoes McGuire's sentiments.

Lightweight materials made from the composites, for example, will play a key role in helping the car industry build more fuel-efficient vehicles.

As much wood and metal as AOC's resins have already helped to replace in products, Weghorst said, "Composites haven't fully occupied their place, yet."

-- *Tom Bailey Jr.: 529-2388*

### **Futuristic headquarters**

**What:** AOC's new world headquarters

**When:** Completed in May

**Where:** 955 Tenn. 57

**Building:** On target to get silver LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification

**Features:** Theater-like training room with computer screens that recede under the desktop; rooms that automatically grow warmer or cooler depending on occupancy; lights that turn on via motion sensor; angled exterior wall that modulates the heat and cold.

**Cost:** Company declines to divulge, but construction was described as an \$8 million capital improvement project in 2007.

**Architect:** Curtiss Doss of McGehee, Nicholson, Burke Architects

