

dg by air

The mark of innovation

PROFILE US-based Inmark's customer-driven approach to developing packagings for the transport of dangerous goods by air is paying dividends for both the company and hazmat shippers alike

Although Austell, GA-headquartered Inmark offers shippers a significant array of stock packagings for the transport of dangerous goods by air, much of the company's output is actually customer-driven, explains Jay Johnson, the company's regulatory compliance manager. "Inmark is a unique company because we do own some bottle moulds and we do own some cooler moulds, but we don't make bottles, we don't make coolers and we don't make corrugate, we make them better," he asserts. "We put together and assemble packaging for customers and we're pretty savvy about it."

"We do a lot of different packaging for different areas," he continues, noting that of late the company has received a lot of interest in its dangerous goods systems from the Middle East. "We have offices in Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, Florida and Tennessee, so we're regionally located but we have also established a subsidiary company in the UK, Inmark Europe Ltd, and we're actually doing manufacturing and distribution of packaging there as well as out of Singapore," he says. Inmark International LLC, in Singapore, is also wholly owned. With much of Inmark's European and Asian business orientated towards pharmaceutical and life sciences applications, the company, Johnson reveals, is consequently "moving a tonne of UN3372 packaging around the world".

Global trials

A substantial part of the company's recent growth has been driven by pharmaceutical firms and central laboratories conducting global trials. Stemming from the need to achieve standardised testing conditions, there is a clear desire among such shippers to employ uniform packagings capable of safely and securely transporting blood and tissue samples without the risk of spoilage regardless of geography, so Inmark is well positioned to supply both high quality ambient and temperature-controlled systems for just such a purpose.

Inmark has been aided by the presence of globally consistent regulations that mean "you can use the same packaging all over the world as long as it meets the international regulations". However, Johnson notes, a number of airlines have subsequently upset the apple cart by announcing that Category B infectious sub-



Jay Johnson

stance shipments now need to be packaged as though they were Category A materials, which from the shipper's point of view makes the process more complicated, more expensive and generally more problematic.

Fielding requests from across the globe for non-standard packagings, whether in terms of plastics bags for use on the International Space Station or as a means of protecting alcoholic drinks from the ravishes of the Canadian winter, Inmark's extensive team of packaging and sales engineers regularly find themselves having to think outside the box to solve very complex conundrums. "We've even made a combination shipper that is temperature-controlled at the bottom and ambient at the top so that with one package [the customer] could ship both frozen plasma and ambient whole blood," Johnson says, adding that in a similar vein Inmark can also supply dry shippers able "to go to five or six days with very little dry ice" by employing urethane and vacuum-insulated panels. "If you're comfortable with the scenario," he explains, "you can map out very specific packaging systems for customers that are cost-effective, time-saving and work around different regulation in different areas. That's what we do at Inmark."

Not just a box

However, while Inmark may encounter little trouble plotting a course through the maze of regulations governing the transport of dangerous goods by air, the same can not be said for

everybody else. "I certainly feel sorry for people trying to navigate their way through [the regulations]," Johnson says, observing that many shippers, particularly those for whom dangerous goods are a non-core activity, very often do not understand the general workings of the regulations let alone their intricate details. "They'll start out by saying, 'I want a UN-spec box.' Well, that doesn't exist," he says. "A 4G system is not a single packaging, it's in combination and we would have to test it with a UN poly, glass or metal bottle. And then you have to dig out whether the regulations will allow it for the materials you're [looking to ship], and then, more importantly, are we talking packing group I, II or III?"

Indeed, Johnson has encountered situations where shippers have tried to squeeze five bottles into a system designed and tested to handle four or where people have used a combination packaging only to report that they have 'extra parts' left over, unaware that these are integral components without which the system fails to adhere to its certification. Likewise, he also recounts how in a bid to cut costs, there have even been instances where shippers have photocopied the markings on an approved system and simply stuck them onto a standard box. "They don't take that step to make sure the testing matches what they are actually doing and that's been a horrible problem," he says, adding that compatibility issues are another key concern of which many shippers remain oblivious. But whether people like it or not the regulations are there for a reason: "A release of product normally comes from packaging that is not correct."

The situation is, though, improving, Johnson believes, largely as a result of increased education as opposed to the simple levying of fines. And for his part, Johnson can take a certain degree of credit, regularly providing dangerous goods training as an Inmark representative at the governmental, university, clinical and corporate levels. However, he is adamant that training for training's sake serves no practical purpose. Rather, if training is going to have a positive effect, it needs to be function-specific and related to what an individual or company actually does.

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