

by Leah Weissman



# Custer company delivers satisfaction worldwide

*Signature Plastics manufactures a name along with its products*

*Signature Plastics President Bob Gruenser displays the diverse number of mold inserts used in injection molding.*

**T**ake a look around your home. The phone hanging on the wall, the computer softly humming in the bedroom – instead of seeing “Made in China” embossed on the keytops (otherwise known simply as keys) and casings of these products, you may find they are being manufactured in Whatcom County.

Signature Plastics, located on a 16-acre plot in Custer, produces custom moldings from enclosures to credit card machines to keytops for heart defibrillators and computers. The company serves customers worldwide, yet has only 28

employees. Bob Guenser, president and co-owner of Signature Plastics, says sometimes being small is better.

“We don’t produce keys for the Gateways, the Dells and the Hewlett-Packards,” Guenser said. “My philosophy in running Signature Plastics is that no customer is too small for us to do business with. We don’t build to inventory, we build to specific jobs.”

## **Around and around we go**

Signature Plastics’ history is a roller

coaster ride of management shifts, facility relocations and countless endeavors. But don’t put the cart before the horse; the company Signature Plastics didn’t exist until 2001. Guenser bought the Custer division, then known as Comptec Incorporated, from the computer keytop manufacturer Comptec International. The topsy-turvy ride begins in 1973 when Comptec was founded.

Originally located in Burnaby, B.C., Comptec went through several different management teams over the next 30 years. During this time, Comptec developed and perfected a unique two-stage molding process for the production of keytops, earning the honor in the late 1980s as the largest independent keytop manufacturer in the world.

By 1990, the impact of cheap offshore competition chopped Comptec’s revenue in half. The company began exploring alternative routes in custom molding and transferred its entire keytop business to its Custer division. Under new corporate leadership, Comptec entered the automotive market and narrowed its business to a select few companies with \$1 mil-

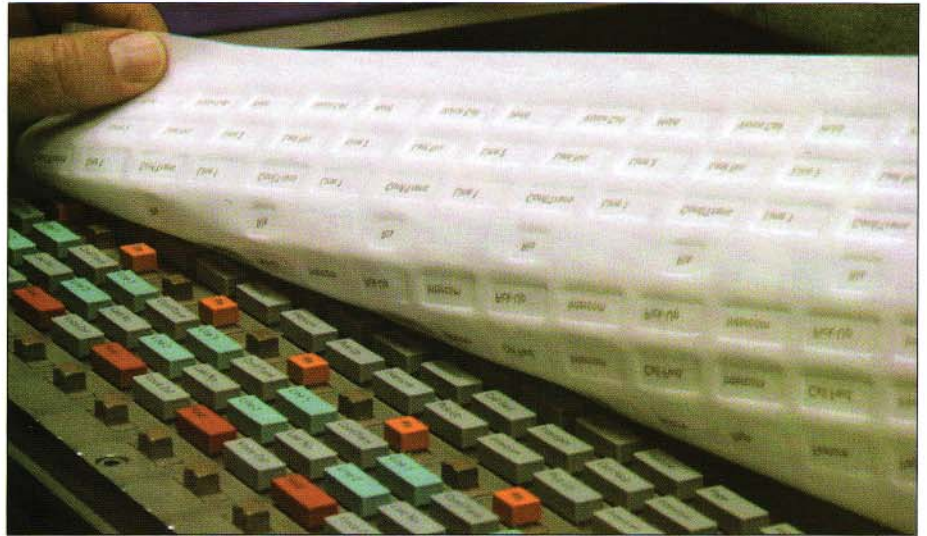
lion in annual sales and dropped clients below the \$10,000 mark.

Failure to compete in the automotive market prompted Comptec's management, a Canadian private investment group called CWC Capital Ltd., to abandon its investment and start looking for buyers. Guenser, who worked for Comptec starting in 1978, approached one of the investors about buying the Custer division.

"It was an opportunity I dreamed would happen someday because I knew we were profitable and I enjoyed working with this great group of people," Guenser said. "It's interesting because I didn't have the money at the time to purchase the division, so I asked the original founder of Comptec, John Cavers, if he would be interested in helping me finance the buyout. As it turned out, the keytop business that started Comptec in the early 1970s was the business we used to start Signature Plastics in 2001. We are actually an old company, albeit much smaller, with a new name."

### Customers worldwide

Signature Plastics' business is derived



*When manufacturing keyboards, images are printed on paper in reverse before being sublimated onto plastic keys.*

from customers all over the world, the top five clients being from Canada, England, the U.S., Australia and China. With more than \$2 million in revenue last year, it's hard to fathom that this local company continues to grow essentially through word of mouth.

"The keytop world revolves around a

pretty tight community," Guenser said. "Many of our customers carried over from Comptec and word got out quite quickly, 'Where do you get your keytops?' So we haven't had to do any real marketing. Our strategy is basically very simple – our business grows through referrals. Produce a quality part on time



Employees at Signature Plastics work on the floor with all types of machinery including molding presses to sublimation presses.

and at a competitive price, bend over backwards with good customer service, and you have a customer for life. We've grown from 80 to 150 clients since 2001 and doubled our revenue. It's a niche business. People find us."

According to Guenser, 50 percent of Signature Plastic's business circles

around keytops for computers, point-of-sale devices like cash registers, and data collection systems. About 30 percent of the company's commerce draws from telecom-related products: Companies buy used phone systems and employ Signature Plastics to repopulate the pads with new keys. Approximately 20 percent

of business stems from custom molding of enclosures such as plastic housings and lenses for credit card swipes.

"Our reputation has always been the 'keytop supplier' when in fact we manufacture a wide variety of high precision, highly cosmetic plastic parts for a variety of customers in other markets," Guenser said. "We want to diversify and get more into custom plastics – basically high precision products outside the keytop world. The next phase of business is to market more in Whatcom County. There is plenty of opportunity in our own backyard."

### The art of molding

The idea of injection molding sounds easy – a machine injects melted plastic into a mold, applies pressure, and voila, you have a keytop. Unless of course you're a company that performs a two-process type of molding, uses several printing methods, manufactures parts for custom orders and is highly detail-oriented.

Guenser described the two-stage "two-shot" molding process in separate steps.

"First shots are produced by reverse engraving a customer's graphic into a brass plate, which is then inserted into the bottom, cavity side of the mold," he said. "Plastic is injected into the mold, filling the engraved brass. When the mold opens, the character is molded onto a plastic part which we refer to as the first shot."

Doesn't sound too difficult, except customers will specify how tall a character is, where it's located on the key and countless other details. Etching the design into a brass legend and inspecting the final product for defects is time and labor intensive.

"Everyone wants their product to have a little twist, a unique look," Guenser said. "We have an extensive library of keytop graphics of over 30,000 different characters. Customers supply us a graphic or idea of the keytop application they want and we check our database to see if it's something that already exists. If it does, great. If not, we can create it."

The second process of two-shot injection molding defines the product's shape and final detail, Guenser said. The first shot is inserted into the second shot

mold and liquid plastic is injected into the graphic, filling gaps and smoothing out the surface.

“There is only one other company in the U.S. I know of that molds keytops using this process,” Guenser said.

Beyond injection molding, Signature Plastics also decorates its plastic products through different printing techniques. Just like waxing skis – cover the base with wax, fill in the gaps and scrape off any excess wax – pad printing follows a relatively similar process. Ink floods a steel plate with an engraved design, fills in the recesses from the etching and a blade scrapes the leftover ink off the surface. A silicon pad then lifts the ink out of the plate and transfers the design onto a plastic part.

Sublimation printing can also be understood through a common application: printing your favorite graphic on a T-shirt. Images are printed in reverse with specialty inks on a piece of paper. The paper is placed on a plastic part in a press, and with the help of some heat and pressure, the ink sublimates to a gas and penetrates the key leaving the design.

“We take pride in what we do and excel in products that have a high cosmetic requirement,” Guenser said. “There are a lot of molders that can turn on a machine, turn off the lights and go home – basically producing a shoot-and-ship-quality product. That’s not what we do. We have 27 injection molding machines, eight sublimation and pad printing presses, and our set-up technicians and operators inspect every part they make.”

### Good business practice

The two most important factors contributing to Signature Plastics’ success are the way it treats its customers and its employees.

“Maintaining a good business relationship with all customers, no matter what size, is not only good business practice but may pay huge dividends in the long haul,” Guenser said. “We just received a request to quote on a very large promotional project for a customer that had been turned away by Comptec several years ago because the company did not meet the minimum annual sales requirement. Signature Plastics has been

cultivating a renewed relationship with this customer and this project could be huge for us.”

When Signature Plastics became an independent company in 2001, Guenser said he sent out letters to Comptec’s old customers introducing the new company and welcoming everyone who Comptec turned away.

“One unique thing about being able to start up Signature Plastics is that I could pick the employees I wanted to take with me to keep this company going,” Guenser said. “I’ve worked with most

of these people for over 25 years and they all have a tremendous work ethic. I truly believe I could take this group, drop them into a different manufacturing setting, and we would be just as successful. Over the years we have all maintained a high level of trust and respect for each other and with that foundation you can go anywhere.”