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Colourful chemist cooks up wood-repair product

BRESLAU — For years, Robin Pixner has handed out copies of the Dr. Seuss children’s book, *Oh, The Places You’ll Go*, to customers and suppliers.

“You get your ups and downs (in life) and you’ve got to push through,” says the owner of Stellchem Inc., summarizing the message of the popular book.

The book came in handier than he ever realized a few years ago.

A chemistry grad from the University of Waterloo, Pixner developed a packaging product in the 1990s that laminated foam onto corrugated cardboard. It was a hit, particularly with furniture companies.

The first-time entrepreneur was riding high.

But the recession of 2007 to 2008 brought him down. Furniture companies closed or stopped buying, cheaper Chinese competition moved in and an attempt to develop a recyclable version of his packaging proved too expensive.

Pixner sold off his packaging equipment in 2009.

“It was tough,” he admits. “I am not a Fortune 500 company. At the time I had six people here.”

But the colourful chemist didn’t just sit around and mope. He pivoted in a new direction.

Now he’s back with a new product that takes a huge bite out of the cost of repairing or replacing rotten or damaged wood, he says.

Called Rhino Wood Repair, it’s an epoxy-based product that fills in the cavities or cracks in rotten beams, boards or posts.

You can hammer nails into it, drill screws into it, mould it into different shapes, saw, sand and paint it, Pixner says.

To demonstrate, his son Jason pounds several nails into an old log, hollowed out and filled with Rhino Wood Repair. He cuts through it with a power saw. He bounces it off the concrete floor.

Applied in putty form, the product hardens into a substance that’s stronger than pine or Douglas fir, says Pixner.

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Robin Pixner (right), president of Stellchem, and his son, Jason, use an old log to demonstrate how tough the company’s new epoxy-based wood repair product is.

He started working on the wood-repair product about six years ago at the request of a customer in California. Three years of tinkering and fine-tuning followed before it was market-ready, he says.

He began selling it on a private-label basis with the California firm. Then came another blow that had him reaching for Dr. Seuss again. The customer couldn't pay its bills.

"It hit me pretty hard," Pixner says.

He decided to rebrand the product as Rhino Wood Repair and market it himself through Stellchem.

Named after the burly, tough-skinned animal of Africa and southern Asia, the substance has been approved by the American Society for Testing and Materials, he notes.

He plans to sell it to construction contractors and retail customers including Home Hardware, which will debut the product shortly, he says.

Other applications include boat and concrete repairs and wood damaged by termites or ants, Pixner says.

He envisions a big market in cottage country or areas with wet climates. "Wherever it's raining constantly, you get wood damage," he says.

The Rhino repair kit also comes with a liquid substance to apply ahead of time to kill the fungus rotting the wood.

At one time, Stellchem also specialized in custom adhesives and specialty glues. Now it is focusing more on high-end epoxy systems, coatings and environmentally friendly products, says Pixner.

The goal is to "get away from me-too stuff," he says.

Another potential product is emerging out of a joint venture with the University of Waterloo's chemical engineering department to develop coatings for tiny, nanotechnology products, he says.

Pixner also hopes to develop a coating to repel water. Imagine the applications for food-processing plants to reduce contamination or smartphone-makers if a phone could be dropped in water and avoid damage, he says.

He doesn't want to apply for a patent for Rhino Wood Repair because patents must include the raw materials that went into the product. All a competitor has to do is change one ingredient, he says.

For now, Pixner is Stellchem's sole employee. His son Jason helps out when needed and more employees can be brought in when needed, he says.

The company occupies a cluttered, 2,000 square foot space in a Breslau industrial building. Barrels and boxes stretch to the ceiling along several walls. A large mixing machine dominates one corner and skids of logs sit on the floor.

The 50-year-old Pixner says his main challenge now is promoting the product and taking it to market. Marketing is not one of his strong points, he admits.

"I'm a chemist. If I'm working in a lab I can develop almost anything."