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## Disabled workers offer packaging solution

by James Heffernan



A research team at Colorado-based WhiteWave Foods discovered that some coffee drinkers who shop in bulk were having trouble using its three-pack of dairy creamers in a timely manner. Looking for a solution, WhiteWave turned to a partnership of Shenandoah Valley companies to create smaller packages for distribution to wholesale clubs along the East Coast.

InterChange Group, a warehousing and logistics firm, teamed up with Friendship Industries, a local provider of employment and job training for people with disabilities. Friendship Industries employees now repackage, label and stack the creamers inside InterChange's 64,000-square-foot

refrigerated facility in Harrisonburg.

"InterChange had the logistics, the warehousing and the refrigeration, but they didn't have the packaging expertise and the work force to accomplish the task," said Tom Hook, Friendship Industries' chief operating officer. In late 2009, the two companies went to WhiteWave and proposed a joint venture, with each investing in the needed equipment and resources.

Food manufacturers like WhiteWave are constantly looking for innovative ways to increase the appeal of their products, Hook says. "We have a lot of experience, and we understand the customer's need for quick turnaround and a high-quality package," he adds. The nonprofit has been packaging products for Fortune 500 companies and the federal government for more 40 years.

Despite its nonprofit status, Friendship Industries must function as a business, Hook says, including competing with for-profit companies for contracts. The partnership with InterChange "aligns perfectly with our mission of providing dignified employment to persons with disabilities, and it allows us the opportunity to expand into the refrigerated packaging arena," Hook says.

"Our focus has always been a high-volume, truckload-in, truckload-out [operation]," said Keith VanBenschoten, who manages InterChange's Harrisonburg operations. "But this is detailed work, with product repackaging, relabeling and restacking. Without them, administratively, it would bog us down. I'm not sure we could go out on the street and find anyone who could manage it as well as they have."

Friendship Industries employs approximately 130 people. Workers are grouped by ability and often work independently alongside colleagues without disabilities. "We've created an integrated work environment that allows for a good transition to other [employment]," said President George W. Homan II.

Friendship Industries was not immune to the recent recession, but work has begun to pick up. For many companies, "we are a flex-force or labor advantage to them," Hook says, offering skilled workers and a fixed-unit cost.

In addition to the WhiteWave contract, the Harrisonburg facility regularly performs repackaging for Wal-Mart distribution centers and is the exclusive manufacturer for a New Zealand company that sells retractable blinds. Among its other jobs are assembling survival packs for the U.S. Air Force and providing quality assurance for E-Z Pass transponder systems for the Puerto Rico Highway and Transportation Authority.

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