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Local spotlight

Warehousing firm thrives on innovation

Company has evolved into a full-service storage, packaging and transportation provider.

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Talk about going out of your way for a customer -- at the request of one of its clients, Evans Distribution Systems recently jack-hammered through inches of cement inside one of its Michigan facilities to uncover railroad tracks.

The process, which would normally take six months, was completed in about 60 days, said Patrick Swaney, general manager of warehousing for the Melvindale-based logistics provider.

The client, a high-end tomato paste manufacturer, had approached Evans because they needed food-grade facilities with rail service to distribute their product. Evans could handle the job, Swaney said, but only if they uncovered the lines. Lines, by the way, they had cemented over some 20 years ago to make storage space for another client.

"We knew who the right people were to talk to and get things going," Swaney said. The result is two working lines via Norfolk and Conrail and one happy manufacturer.

To stay competitive, Evans has had to evolve multiple times over its 80-year history, said Leslie Ajlouny, vice president of business development. But being flexible is why they survive and even thrive despite the state's floundering economy.

"We can support a small startup to Chrysler to Anheuser-Busch, Ajlouny said. "In today's economy, our customers are telling us they want solutions that are more scalable or flexible (and) that's bringing new opportunities to Evans."

In fact, Evans announced in January that it formally launched Evans Resource Solutions, a professional



Photos by Velvet S. McNeil / The Detroit News

James Kish, a warehouseman who has worked for Evans Distribution Systems for 30 years, moves pallets for a storage customer.

staffing service aimed at placing qualified logistics workers into temporary positions.

Based on a company's specific requirements, Evans Resource Solutions recruits qualified candidates and handles the pre-screening, testing and training. Evans can find staff for everything from assembly to inventory control to material handling to truck driving.

"It's common in the supply chain to experience peaks when inventory needs to be sorted, packaged or inspected but it doesn't always justify hiring full-time personnel," Ajlouny said. "This service helps companies stay competitive. They're able to meet their deadlines and get the product to its destination without a hitch."

Founder Wellington Evans started the company in 1929 as the Central Detroit Warehouse Co. Today, it is a full-service warehousing, packaging and transportation logistics provider. It is still managed by the Evans family, which has worked there for four generations now. Evans' grandson, John A. Evans, serves as the company's current president.

Evans works with a variety of industries, including automotive, spirits and beverages, paper and chemicals. The company employs about 300 people and operates more than 1.8 million square feet of space in three states. In addition to its Melvindale corporate headquarters, Evans has two facilities in Detroit and one each in Howell, Devens, Mass., and Suffolk, Va.

Generally, the national picture for wholesalers-distributors like Evans is a grim one, according to the National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors, a trade organization in Washington D.C. The latest data for fourth quarter 2008 shows declines across every industry, according to Adam J. Fein, head of the NAW Institute for Distribution Excellence.

Those numbers are just another reason Evans values its customers.

"At the end of the day, it's all about custom service," Ajlouny said. "Whether it is people, processes or technology, our goal is to make it easy."

Karen Dybis is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.