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The family behind Impact Absorbents, from left: Liz Tharp, Graham Tharp, Jesse Woodard, Misha Woodward, Pat Tharp and Gary Tharp. Their canine pals are Bo and Cleo the poodle.

They're soaking up success

BY BROOKS ROCHE
Special to Business Times

It's hard to believe that it's possible to take trash and turn it into a product that saves the environment and brings in several million dollars of revenue a year, but that's exactly what Gary Tharp did with Impact Absorbents Inc.

Tharp started the company in 1992 to produce an absorbent material called XSORB. This natural mineral absorbs a spilled liquid, enabling the cleanup team to simply sweep up the mess while leaving no residue behind.

The company started as a small family operation in the Tharp family garage, with Gary and his son Graham filling bottles and bags from a trash can with a dispensing nozzle made from a tail pipe. The Tharps were surprised by the demand for the product and they quickly outgrew their garage.

Impact Absorbents now has 30 employees working at its 45,000-square-foot headquarters and manufacturing plant based in Atascadero. Six of the employees are family members, but all other employees are treated as family as well. Gary's wife, Pat, specializes in marketing, daughter Misha heads up human resources, and son Graham runs the computer systems; all are stockholders in the company. Misha and Graham's spouses, Jesse and Liz, also work part-time in marketing. Gary himself does research and development for their ever-growing product line.

Some may think working closely with family members would be a difficult prospect, but not at Impact Absorbents.

"I enjoy it," says Jesse Woodard, "We've got a really neat family dynamic here. It's pretty conducive to business."

Today the company makes and sells more than 300 products worldwide, though most are in California and the West Coast. Less than 10 years ago

Impact Absorbents

Central Coast
Medium Family-Owned Business

Principal: Gary Tharp

Headquarters: Atascadero

Founded: 1992

the company was bringing in \$1 million a year; by the end of 2010, Impact expects to break \$3 million in sales.

Making it to the big leagues was not a straight and easy path. At the beginning, the Tharps decided on the name XSORB for their main product line, and received a national trademark to protect the name. A few years later, a company with a similar name, but no trademark, challenged them in court. "After two years of legal work we won that battle," Gary Tharp said in an e-mail.

The recession has slowed growth a little, but it hasn't been all bad. "It has provided us the opportunity to refine our costing and lower our purchasing costs. With increased marketing and sales efforts we continue to add accounts both large and small," Tharp wrote.

Impact Absorbents' XSORB line is being used for a variety of spills in many different places. Currently it is being used to clean up a nuclear dumpsite. It's been used many times for oil spills in oceans, lakes and streams, and is approved by the California Fish and Game Department for use on all Californian bodies of water. It's also been used by the National Hot Rod Association for oil cleanup, CalTrans and the Washington State Department of Transportation.