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Simpler idea develops after hours of design

Battlefield company makes better conveyor system

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News-Leader

Sometimes blessings are disguised as misfortunes.

Just ask business owner Frank Norton.

In spring 1999, Norton injured his arm, forcing him to take a month off work. That's when he created Snap Lock Inc.

Snap Lock is a modular conveyor system designed and manufactured in Battlefield. It differs from other conveyor systems in that the customized parts — which snap together — can be easily disassembled without tools.

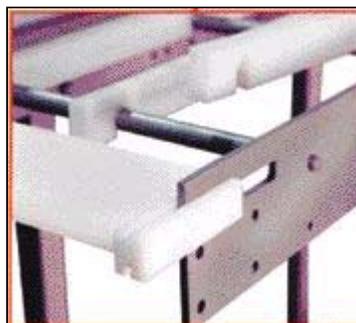
The system is particularly appealing for food-production companies, which need to sanitize equipment. His invention, patented in 2002, will be showcased in the March issue of *Baking Management*, a national trade magazine for companies in the baking industry.

The article features the Rhodes International Inc. plant in Idaho, which uses Snap Lock and praises the system for its versatility and flexibility.

Since implementing the modular



FBN Metal Products Inc.



The Snap Lock table and the nose bar and belt support wear-bar for the Snap Lock conveyor.

FBN Metal Products Inc.



Frank Norton Found time to work on a new idea after suffering an injury to his arm

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conveyor, the maintenance manager said the company has been able to build upon the system, saving it time from starting anew every time changes were warranted.

Which is exactly what Norton had in mind.

In 1986, Norton opened FBN Metal Products Inc., which designs, fabricates and installs conveyor systems.

He noticed when companies needed to change conveyor systems, the whole belt was often scrapped. The modular model allows a company to expand, move or decrease the size of the conveyor.

"We saw a need for a system that would evolve and change as needs change," Norton said.

Snap Lock is designed so both the length and the width can be changed. Norton said Snap Lock offers several advantages, including reducing shipping costs by 30 percent to 40 percent because the system is not already put together and can be assembled on site.

Norton's products are in about a dozen states and in Mexico.

Clients include Boar's Head, J.L. DeGraffenreid and Sons in Springfield, and Rhodes International.

Last year, Snap Lock accounted for a quarter of the business. "I can see it outpacing the products," Norton said.

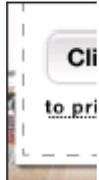
At the business in Battlefield, which employs 12, ginger-haired Austin Brown watches a computer monitor in the manufacturing area as a water jet etches the company's logo onto a piece of metal.

Clad in overalls and wearing protective glasses, the bearded man said the water jet can cut plastic, stone and other materials. Many Snap Lock components are plastic, but Norton uses the other side of his business to build the base of the conveyor.

Norton said even though he has invented something that keeps companies from constantly replacing their systems, he believes there is enough demand out there to keep him busy, and plans to continue evolving his product.

In the back of the 7,500-square-foot building, Norton pulled the plastic off an assembled model. It stretched approximately 12 feet, and it was fitted with a weight machine that weighs the product and pushes it aside if the weight is off.

"I think anything someone can dream up in the conveyor system, we can make it," said employee Louise Henson.



Henson, who hasn't been with the company long, said she never thought she'd find a conveyor so fascinating.

Said Norton: "It's a very simple system, but it's taken hundreds of hours to design it. I don't know how to get people to appreciate how long it takes to create something so simple."

And it wouldn't have happened without the injured arm because Norton said he never would have had time to focus.

The Snap Lock table (left) and the nose bar and belt support wear-bar for the Snap Lock conveyor.



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