

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

A better pet door, from Bradenton to the world

By [Josh Salman](#)

Published: Sunday, April 20, 2014 at 11:25 p.m.

Joe Ambrose comes from a family that built automotive dashboards and ceiling panels in Michigan.

American manufacturing is in his blood.

So when he graduated from Trinity University in Texas and moved to Florida with his wife,

Ambrose sent out 600 mailers to manufacturers across the Sunshine State, asking if they wanted to sell their businesses.

Two weeks and 20 meetings later, the young entrepreneur struck a deal with a couple from Bradenton to buy their pet door company. That was two decades ago, and PlexiDor, of which Ambrose now is CEO, has not stopped growing since.

"I grew up around manufacturing," Ambrose said. "I have a real passion for cranking out things. I'm always looking at products, just thinking 'How can I make 10,000 of these?' "

PlexiDor makes composite pet doors designed to resist damage from sunlight, extreme temperatures and high impacts.

The saloon-style swing door panels are popular among the frigid towns of Canada and other areas where the difference between Ambrose's door and his competitors is 10 percent off an electric bill.

Since Ambrose took over the company in 1994, his sales have risen 20-fold.

He has grown the business from four basic products to a line of more than 50, while moving from 700 square feet to the 9,000-square-foot headquarters it now occupies. The company is even looking for a new facility that is closer to 20,000 square feet.

Ambrose declined to cite specific revenue or an exact payroll count.

But the company now sells pet doors to major distributors around the world -- with his best sales originating outside the U.S.

PlexiDor is still not quite as big as companies around Ambrose's roots near Detroit, and likely never will be. But Ambrose relies on the techniques he learned from four generations of Michigan manufacturers in his work at his production facility at 4523 30th St. W, in Bradenton.

"We are always trying to minimize the steps, and when you do that, your quality is actually improving," Ambrose said. "The less you touch the product, the less chance you have to scratch it. When we pull our products off the line, you don't even have to clean them."



STAFF PHOTO / ELAINE LITHELAND

PlexiDor manufactures secure, lockable pet doors. The Bradenton-based company ships its products to nine countries through a network of authorized dealers.

INNOVATING THROUGH THE RECESSION

During the past two decades, PlexiDor saw steady growth of about 20 percent each year. But, like manufacturers of other durable goods, the company took a beating during the Great Recession.

Instead of pulling back, however, Ambrose hired a pair of business consultants from Chicago to study the company's operation.

"We didn't need a new product," Ambrose said. "We needed new customers because our old way of doing things wasn't working anymore."

At the end of their visit, the consultants sat down with Ambrose in his office and scolded him for never leaving Bradenton.

During the company's infancy, the CEO regularly took trips around the world to promote his products at trade shows and network with industry insiders.

But having raised a family and focused on PlexiDor's daily operations, Ambrose realized he had not taken one of those trips in 14 years.

He hopped on the next flight he could, bound for a trade show in Canada, then Switzerland, then the United Kingdom. His sales immediately doubled.

"Turns out they were right," Ambrose said. "All of our growth has been outside the U.S. Now, we need more elbow room. We have doubled in the last four years, and we project to double again in the next two years."

A BETTER PRODUCT

PlexiDor makes a variety of higher-end pet doors that range in price from \$163 to \$1,249. The products are mostly sold to distributors, who work with authorized dealers around the globe.

The doors are made from composite panels -- developed by the company -- that are designed to be sturdy and to seal weather out.

Unlike most standard pet doors, which are made from a mud-flap material, Ambrose's products open like old-time Western saloon doors and shut tightly.

With certain models, a pet can even wear a collar that signals the doors to open and close so the animal can come and go as easily as a driver with a garage door opener.

The company's estimate that its doors save pet owners up to 10 percent on their energy bills could be worth as much as \$1,200 over five years.

"The bottom line is our door works," Ambrose said. "Our competitors have been around 50 years, and they haven't changed. They have been beat up by the Home Depots and the Lowe's of the world -- which dictate the market.

"That's like saying I know I need a kitchen door, but we can save some money if we just tack up a shower curtain."

A SHOWY DOOR FOR SHOW DOGS

Barbara Cook was interested in a pet door at her Sarasota home for her six show dogs.

The Weimaraners, a breed of German hunting dogs, can now go in and out without Cook having to get out of her seat every few minutes.

But it was the door's ability to keep the air-conditioned air in and hot air out that sold her.

"I would have never put in a door if I hadn't seen this one," she said. "It gets a lot of use, that's for sure."

PlexiDor joins a growing number of manufacturers in Florida that specialize in doors and windows, with two-thirds of all doors and windows that are made in the U.S. now being built in the Sunshine State, trade records show.

That includes local manufacturing giants PGT in Venice and IRISS, a specialty window manufacturer that has built a new global headquarters in Lakewood Ranch.

Manufacturers attribute that to the construction industry here, which is more active than in many other states.

"It's the supply chain," said Peter Straw, executive director of the Sarasota Manatee Manufacturers Association.

"The closer you are to your market, the lower your costs are. And who has more construction going on than Florida? It's a natural fit for logistics purposes."

Copyright © 2014 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.