Back in 2015, *Construction in Focus* wrote about ML Kishigo, the manufacturer of high-visibility safety clothes and equipment. The Brilliant series and Black series workwear were in their infancy back then, and the West Virginia warehouse was just up and running. One major issue back in 2015 was the influx of companies with little to no experience flooding the market with inferior non ANSI compliant products while claiming ANSI compliance. We caught up with President Greg Hayward.

Written by Mark Golombek

“The big news is that we were acquired by the Bunzl company, a $10+billion company traded on the London Stock Exchange. Bunzl is a distribution company and has been actively acquiring safety companies. We were the seventh safety acquisition for them,” says Greg.

The Bunzl acquisition in March of 2017 gives ML Kishigo additional resources while still allowing it to maintain its many strengths. Bunzl owns several welding manufacturers in addition to general safety manufacturers specializing in gloves, glasses, hard hats and safety vests. The company continues to acquire companies with its strong buying propositions of providing more to employees and capital to fuel the businesses growth.

“The nice thing about the Bunzl Company is that they allow the business to operate autonomously. Most strategic acquisitions have all the companies under one umbrella, oftentimes diluting the core strengths of the businesses they buy. Bunzl really expects its companies to operate independently, carrying on the same mantra they had prior,” says Greg.

One of the advantages of the Bunzl acquisition is that it has given the company more capital to accomplish other things that a smaller company could not achieve on its own like a full stocking warehouse in Memphis that provides the company with better distribution capabilities. The main facility is in Santa Ana, and the Memphis warehouse allows the company
to carry more inventories. The result is that ML Kishigo will be able to grow at a more rapid pace, which would not have been possible without Bunzl.

Kishigo has a history of producing innovative high-visibility products, and this continues to this day. There have been changes in the industry, and enhanced visibility garments now include many colour options. ML Kishigo has expanded its line considerably to accommodate these markets.

“Many of these garments are not ANSI compliant. However, in many cases, ANSI garments may not be necessary and allowing workers to differentiate themselves becomes a more important factor. We have also expanded our Type O Class 1 offering in this same arena,” says Greg.

ML Kishigo offered a few Type O Class 1 garments – the basic level of safety wear – back in 2015 to reach more people. The standard was revised in 2015, as it is every five years, to enable garments to be designed for a broader range of users. The Type O Class 1 garment allows for a broad range of colors while still maintaining a minimum of fluorescent color and reflective tape.

“It’s all-encompassing, and visibility is growing. The standard allows us to have a little more flexibility in being compliant at the type O Class 1 level,” says Greg.

Other changes in the 2015 standard include exceptions for smaller workers. ML Kishigo can now get smaller workers better fitting garments, and that line has expanded as well. A line of women’s vests and jackets has also been developed. As the market continues to evolve, ML Kishigo’s product line evolves with it. There is a lot more interest in high-visibility from women as more are entering industry. The need for garments that fit more appropriately is growing.

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Competition that has little to no experience is a challenge for ML Kishigo. “People get into the business that don’t really know what they’re doing. In many cases, ML Kishigo is providing ANSI compliant products and the uneducated competitor is providing products that ‘appear’ compliant but are not. We oftentimes are not comparing apples to apples. At this point, we are comfortable in our own skin and feel that we cannot police the industry. We are in a good position and try not to get distracted by these inferior competitors,” says Greg.

It is not that concerned with new entries into the industry. Whereas, the last time we spoke, there was a big influx of importers. This has slowed down somewhat, and the company’s focus on the high-visibility product lines continues to be strategic.

“That focus is on keeping us ahead of the game. We try to be the number one go-to company and are positioned in the top three for North America. There are a handful of competitors that are nipping at our toes, but we remain focused as the industry continues to grow,” says Greg.

ML Kishigo’s position in the market was solidified by its purchase by Bunzl. It gives it the manpower to grow faster than in the past. The competition is there, and they are aggressively going after more market share. ML Kishigo is well positioned to continue making innovative products of the highest quality.

The garment maker has 160 employees, which includes four people in the research and development department. There is a lot of cooperation involved. ML Kishigo has a director of product development who works together with a pattern maker/designer and a senior team. Greg is very involved in this process, lending his experience to the product design.

“We all work together in coming up with new designs. We get input from our outside salespeople, but really it’s about the collaborative effort amongst our team of four that focus on the development side,” says Greg.

ML Kishigo has learned that the market is not always looking for the least expensive product. It believes that a significant segment of buyers appreciate better quality and a more efficient design and are willing to pay for better garments. This is where the Black and Brilliant lines of products come in, and the lines are faring extremely well.

“It comes with more strategically placed reflective material, providing a better human form outline. These products have done well, and I think the market is willing to invest in its people and have them safer, look better and wear a product that lasts longer,”
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says Greg. Both lines are ideally designed for workers who are in the middle of traffic or performing road construction.

ML Kishigo moved the West Virginia facility, which was carrying about twenty percent of the stock keeping units. It was moved to Memphis and consolidated with the full stocking warehouse. This happened about six months ago.

“We moved those products and added a full line of stocking products to Memphis, which is more centrally located. This allows us to service the industry better with quicker delivery. That was the objective of the move,” says Greg. The company also has had a screen-printing facility in Memphis for close to nine months, and this has proven to be a good option for its distributors.

Plans for the future also include elevating service. The company implemented a system that enables it to be more transparent. The system constantly measures on time shipping or screen print capacity. Success becomes something that is quantifiable by the team.

“This is a transition we have really embraced in building more metrics for the company. We now have ways to measure and support our employees and provide a better way to measure how we are doing. It is an important way for us to have transparency,” says Greg.

ML Kishigo’s goal is to continue to build a robust brand, and it may be the only true, recognized brand for high-visibility products. There are other well-known brands, but these are not necessarily known for high-visibility safety gear.

“With this focus, I believe there is still room to expand and build our brand. My goal over the next ten years is to ensure that the brand continues to strengthen and is always relevant. It is something we feel very strongly about. We want people to recognize the Kishigo brand,” says Greg.

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