

Rubber & Plastics News

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Rubber Division, Rubber Heart join forces for education

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Gail Reader (left) and David Cawthra (right), pictured here with Rubber Division CEO Lakisha Miller-Barclay, developed a relationship with the Rubber Division long before they founded Rubber Heart..

AKRON—Nobody needed signed, official papers to know that David Cawthra and Gail Reader were ACS Rubber Division through and through.

They already embodied everything the Rubber Division stands for: passion, education, professionalism, collaboration. So when the pair embarked on a new venture—founding Rubber Heart Ltd. as an industry-dedicated marketing, communications and sales firm—one of the first partnerships they forged was with the Rubber Division.

"It almost felt like they were an extension of us," said Gretchen Cermak, the Rubber Division's marketing and communications director. "The paper just made it official. They were always out there carrying our message."

Now, as Cawthra and Reader carry the Rubber Division's message, they're doing so as official European representatives. Rubber Heart disclosed the official partnership in late September.

"We didn't take it with just a pinch of salt when we saw that we were their first European representatives in their 111-year history," Cawthra said. "We were massively humbled by that."

The partnership between Rubber Heart and Rubber Division made sense on many levels, according to Cermak. Based in Hertford, England, Cawthra and Reader had established worldwide connections throughout the industry. Cawthra, a marketing expert, and Reader, who has a background in chemistry, brought together a balanced expertise that touched all areas of the industry.

"We never would have taken the step we have," Cermak said, "if it wasn't for their professional expertise and professionalism ... and their decades of experience and strong connections in our industry."

Cawthra and Reader first crossed paths with the Rubber Division in 2012, attending the International Elastomer Conference as representatives of their previous company, Rubber Consultants. They have seen the Rubber Division help businesses and professionals through solidified connections and educational opportunities.

"Europe is a really important area for us to try to increase awareness of the Rubber Division," Reader said. "The Rubber Division has been doing such a great job with events and their whole community and, I think, if (businesses) became aware, they'd see how much good (the Rubber Division) can do for a European company."

Leaning into technology

Since Rubber Heart formed in January, Reader and Cawthra have been working with the Rubber Division, helping to expand and reinforce the international reach of the organization.

"We were talking about events planning and what we were going to do jointly, and then everything was canceled," Reader said, referring to the pandemic's impact. "The whole thing has been adapted, and it has been adapted incredibly well with Lakisha at the helm."

Educational outreach has been a major focus for the Rubber Division overall, and the COVID-19 pandemic certainly didn't help, shutting down travel and canceling in-person events. In spite of these challenges, the Rubber Division found ways to connect professionals and students to educational opportunities by leaning into technology.

Through webinars and online courses, the Rubber Division brought experts into the homes and offices of rubber industry professionals, providing the insights, education and professional development opportunities they sought.

By the time the virtual International Elastomer Conference kicked off on Oct 19, the Rubber Division had hosted 59 educational opportunities: 46 courses and 13 webinars. Those digital events saw participation from 1,500 individuals worldwide, according to Heather Maimone, the Rubber Division's membership and outreach director.

Those numbers, Maimone said, stunned her. For all of 2019, she said, the group hosted eight courses and 15 webinars, engaging about 300 individuals in the process.

Courses and webinars offered in 2020 ranged from the basics of elastomeric properties to more technical aspects of rubber chemistry manufacturing. They also focus on a cross-section of business areas from social media and marketing to workplace safety.

"The thing that has stood out to me," Maimone said, "is the demand for safety training and lab safety."

Broadened connections throughout the industry helped the Rubber Division find the right experts to lead each session and take the education to new heights with technology such as augmented reality. Maimone said she is excited to see how these efforts evolve in 2021.

Student engagement

Reader pointed to the Rubber Division's decision to make educational sessions available free of charge to students as one of those steps that could make a considerable difference for the next generation of industry professionals, and for the future of the Rubber Division overall.

Maimone said building stronger student chapters has been key for the Rubber Division in recent years, and it's an effort the organization is looking to expand, especially with Cawthra and Reader on board to help infuse energy and support for international student chapters.

"These are our next generation of workers," Maimone said, noting that before the pandemic, she took advantage of every opportunity possible, attending career fairs, college fairs and other events to raise awareness about opportunities in the rubber industry.

And Maimone has found that this industry outreach is more important now than ever before.

"One of the things I have noticed over the past few years is that a lot of universities are removing bachelor level programs for rubber and offering minors instead," Maimone said. "There is not as much rubber support in the academic advisory work and not enough people advising those programs at the university level."

That's why student chapters can play significant roles in helping to support young academics and foster interest in rubber careers.

But that kind of outreach shouldn't begin at the university level, either. Students can begin considering rubber industry careers at any age, and the Rubber Division has developed partnerships with local organizations to do just that. By partnering with the United Way and the Akron Public Schools, for instance, the Rubber Division can provide teachers the

support and resources needed to help bring rubber-focused science, technology, engineering and math education into the classroom.

Whether it's through classroom science experiments that highlight the industry or through guest speakers who share their insights with students, students are seeing the viability of rubber industry careers.

"This is an exciting industry," Cawthra said, noting that career opportunities in the rubber industry are diverse. From chemistry to communications, there are opportunities for everyone's strength and perspective, he said.

The International Elastomer Conference itself has opened opportunities for students to engage with the industry. For several years, the Rubber Division has invited high school students from the areas where the conference has been conducted to learn more about industry. Something as simple as talking to industry professionals on the expo floor has helped students understand the opportunities available to them.

Talking with those students is good for the rubber industry's veterans, too.

"They come to your stand and chat, and it's fun to see that," Reader said. "One of the silver linings is that there may be more opportunities for students to take part in the IEC next year."

Inline Play

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