

# Short-Run Molding = High Results

## A Customization Alternative for Door and Window Manufacturers

by Ron Kirscht

**T**he current economic downturn, which is slowing both new housing starts and home renovation projects, presents a challenge to door and window manufacturers.

While some companies are responding by either downsizing or limiting production, others are seizing the opportunity to streamline processes and reduce costs, positioning themselves to meet the needs of customers looking for highly customized doors and windows.

One solution that manufacturers in the door and window industry are beginning to consider involves a niche competency called short-run molding—best described as any run, including set up and tear down, that lasts less than 48 hours. Partnering with a molder that specializes in short run can be cost-effective in meeting customers' special orders and unique product specifications.

### Custom Products on the Rise?

Several industry analysts predict the fallout from subprime lending and rising oil prices will continue to mute consumer demand for doors and windows. In such uncertain times, some companies have a tendency to fall into the reactionary trap of skimping on product quality and customer service to scale back on costs.

Despite predictions of another challenging year ahead for door and window manufacturers, there will



At Donnelly, upfront engineering includes the OEMs product development team and a project manager for complete project integration and success.

still be a demand for these products—particularly in the home improvement area. Consumers want to increase the value of their homes by installing durable, energy-efficient products. Current trends in this segment are pointing to an increase in custom doors and windows instead of standard, off-the-shelf products.

Mass-producing the same doors and windows day in and day out isn't much of a challenge. But what happens when an order comes for a smaller run of products that include intricate parts and specifications that could add to overall production time by increasing the necessary number of mold/machine changeovers? That's where working with a short-run specialist can en-

hance value and provide a competitive advantage.

### How Short Run Is Done

The advantage of short-run molding comes from working with a molder that not only has expertise in short-run, but can also become involved in every aspect of the process—from design through production. This allows the molding supplier a chance to learn all aspects of a manufacturer's business, which leads to fewer errors, better products and solutions and lower costs.

For those companies accustomed to doing molding in-house, the thought of outsourcing shorter production runs may be new. However, it makes sense to consider working with a strategic partner



At short-run molder Donnelly, daily runs often involve quantities of only 25 to 1,000 parts, requiring multiple mold changes involving different materials on each machine.



your business, your customers or your products. A good partner should demonstrate a commitment to your overall goals.

### The Value of Up-Front Engineering

One way a supplier can contribute to the success of a project is through upfront engineering. As an example, at our company, a supplier to Marvin Windows and Doors, the concept goes further to include a three-pronged engineering model that proactively addresses the complexities inherent to short-run production. This includes:

- On-site project engineers at the customer's facility who take an active role in the design process;
- Manufacturing engineers who oversee the tooling launch process; and
- Process engineers who support the day-to-day production.

With this level of involvement, the manufacturer works directly with the supplier and can see first-hand how dedicated the team is to understanding how the business is run and to best provide support.

Because door and window specifications can be quite detailed, having an engineering team with short-

run know-how involved in the design process is integral to optimizing the product's run. In addition, taking advantage of the knowledge of the short-run specialist early on can add to the overall quality of the product and improve the design.

In terms of cost savings, an on-site engineer can also suggest alternative materials that may prolong the lifecycle of the part and help increase the durability of the door or window. This is especially important as consumers continue to demand doors and windows that will last a long time and require little to no maintenance.

### Rising to the Challenge

As economic challenges continue to impact consumers' discretionary spending, forward-thinking door and window manufacturers can prepare themselves to meet consumer demand for superior products that win in the marketplace.

To survive and continue growing your business, it's critical to find new and innovative ways to get your products to your customers quickly and efficiently—without sacrificing performance and quality. Leading companies will continue building on current supply chain partnerships and also seek out new partnerships that can help contribute to the overall success of their products.

A short-run molding partnership can be a better way to meet demand for custom doors and windows. And once the industry returns to a growth trend, those companies that have expanded their range of product offerings to include more customized items may find themselves ahead of the game. |

Ron Kirscht is president of Donnelly Custom Manufacturing Co. and has led the company's pursuit of short-run molding.



The average molder has approximately six people trained in mold changeovers.

highly skilled in short-run molding for smaller production runs.

If kept in house, a smaller run typically brings longer lead and changeover times. Companies that specialize in short-run have mold and material changeovers down to a science and present a much more effective use of time, money and labor resources because of the expertise and efficiencies they bring to the table.

Keep in mind, however, that partnering with an outside company can be a challenge if the company in question is not familiar with