

TRUCK TRACKS

by Ken Kelley



Call company by its first name

International Truck and Engine Corp. has replaced Navistar International Corp. as the name of the Chicago-headquartered company that has ranked among the nation's top volume producers of trucks.

It was something of a record for quick changes of company names. International, first used in 1914, was shelved in 1986. After a brief timeout, the International name staged a revival in 2000 as part of a company comeback effort.

In the earlier International era, the competition was not immune to pointing out that the truck maker also was among the major manufacturers of reapers, binders and other machines used down on the farm. Some of the machines were developed by International officials of that earlier era.



Development of "Next Generation Trucks" is under way, according to International.

The link to farming was no big problem in 1914 when the nation was agricultural. But a lot of things changed as the nation moved through the Great Depression, two world wars and became more urbanized. International eventually grew into a major force in trucks while the industry turned into a "citified" operation.

No longer a boys' outfit

Developing and manufacturing engines for its own vehicles and those of other truck makers have become important parts of the company's business in recent years.

And, in a different market, production of school buses ballooned into a volume operation.

Meanwhile, the company's farm equipment arm encountered slow times and was sold to become one of the J. I.

Case network of farm machinery companies. The truck company's construction equipment business also had to be dropped.

Even the truck side had its difficulties. The company was no longer being run by "the boys from Harvester," as they were affectionately known, in the years after World War II.

Slowly but surely, a comeback started gaining momentum, and company management sensed that the time had arrived for a revival of the sound portions of the firm.

After a number of adjustments it has turned in "win-some, lose-some" results, with more wins than losses.

Engine development has been among the winners, pacing the industry in emission control in some ways and enjoying volume sales of an engine line sold to another truck maker.

Labor relations, unsettled for years, have been smoothed, and assignments of the various factories have been rationalized.

Production of "severe service" construction trucks has been moved out of the Canadian plant specializing in volume, over-the-road tractors and moved to a separate operation in Texas. Features of many models have been upgraded, and model numbers have been revised.

The biggest project of the comeback quickly moved into high gear. Development of radically advanced new products got under way, and they could be called the "Next Generation Trucks" or "Next Generation Engines."

Those who know what's coming are more than a little bit excited.

About the time talk of bringing the International name back got serious, the company scored a "win" that was

truly International. Its new factory in Mexico began to turn in solid business results.

The trend was clear. Management had to switch to promoting company products as Internationals. The old name had a heritage behind it that was too well-known and respected to be cast aside.

"The International brand stands for our commitment to support our customers' businesses with products that perform better and have a lower cost of ownership than our competitors' offerings," said Steve Keate, president of the truck group of today's International. "We will go to market with one brand, one voice and one strong visual identity." **R_B**

Kelley is a truck writer based in Charlotte, N.C. You may contact him in care of the editor.