

Reduce, reuse, recycle: Tambrands goes nearly landfill-free

By [Kathryn Skelton, Staff Writer](#)

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AUBURN — It took three years, and some creative reuse, but Tambrands is now nearly landfill-free.

Cardboard is recycled. Tampons taken off the line for test-sample batches go to the Good Shepherd Food-Bank. Retired tools go to a popular employee auction. And compacted office trash goes to a waste-to-energy incinerator.

Parent company Procter & Gamble says Tambrands is the first of its 36 North American plants to hit the zero waste-to-landfill benchmark.

"We got to 99 percent fairly quickly," said Rick Malinowski, the local plant's manager for external relations. "It was that last 1 percent that we had to work at."

Tambrands, Auburn's largest private employer with a staff of 450, makes 9 million tampons a day in a half-million-square-foot factory on Hotel Road. Production lines run constantly, feeding scraps and less-than-perfect product into bins marked "recyclable" or "burnable."

The two waste streams that proved the trickiest, Malinowski said: Cafeteria food and a mixed-waste dumpster with debris such as old chairs. He found vendors willing to sort it or to take the trash to Mid-Maine Waste Action Corp., the waste-to-energy plant in Auburn.

In other partnerships, the company's used computers go to a local nonprofit that works with schools. Employee auctions, at which workers bid on old furniture, equipment and tools that would have been dumped, raised \$10,000 last year for the United Way.

"It's win-win-win," Malinowski said. "And the employees love it."

Human Resources Manager Jodi Buhrer Eller said the motivation hasn't been saving money but, "How do we do the right thing?"

"Eight other (P&G) plants in other parts of the world have accomplished this," Len Sauers, global head of sustainability for Procter & Gamble, said in a phone interview from his Cincinnati office.

P&G owns 140 plants. Many have tried to find a niche for waste.

"We can take scraps from our laundry-detergent plants; it's going to car washes," Sauers said. "Toothpaste that's not quite up to spec is going to a company that makes chrome and jewelry cleaner. Perfumes that aren't quite up to spec are going to a company that makes potpourri. We make Metamucil — it's going to a company that does soil remediation."

Sustainability, he said, is important to the company and its customers, part of a goal to one day power operations with 100 percent renewable energy and use 100 percent renewable materials.

The Auburn plant makes Tampax brand tampons for all of North America. In the past 10 years, Procter & Gamble has invested more than \$350 million in the facility, including nine production lines for the popular Pearl, which Malinowski said has a 26 percent share of the tampon market.

Achieving zero waste-to-landfill meant finding alternatives for 2,300 tons per year of waste, he said. "Construction waste goes to Corcoran Environmental in Kennebunk for sorting of metal/wood/plastic for recycling, and corrugated cardboard goes to Corcoran Environmental in Mechanic Falls for recycling."

The rest, general waste, heads to MMWAC. Executive Director Joe Kazar said the Tambrands effort adds "a very small fraction" to the overall waste he incinerates. One-third of the electricity created at the trash-to-energy plant runs that facility; the remainder is sent to Central Maine Power Co. via a local substation. Each ton incinerated offsets the equivalent of using two barrels of oil, Kazar said, and reduces by 90 percent the volume of waste that goes to landfill as ash.

"I'm really encouraged when I see Procter & Gamble doing this and promoting it," Kazar said. "Frequently, when you're hearing the benefits of waste-to-energy, you're hearing it from people like me."

kskelton@sunjournal.com