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## Made in Milwaukee: Blue skies for Amalga Composites

By [Kay Nolan](#), for BizTimes  
Published [June 24, 2011](#)

### Amalga Composites Inc.

10600 W. Mitchell St., West Allis, WI 53214

Products: Filament-wound composite pneumatic and hydraulic cylinder tubing, reservoir quality tubing, fiberglass epoxy tubing, cores, rollers and shafts, launch tubes, food grade tubing, pressure vessels, compression molding, light RTM, electrical tubing.

[www.amalgacomposites.com](http://www.amalgacomposites.com)

Employees: 60



Amalga Composites' custom-engineered products are cruising the sky above Afghanistan in unmanned drones, gliding through the ocean as part of underwater testing equipment and slicing through the air as the sleek white blades of wind turbines.

It wasn't always that way for the West Allis engineering and manufacturing firm.

The company has come a long way since its founding in 1966, during the post-World War II era when new uses were being sought for the materials developed in the aircraft industry.

Back in 1989, when Jim Dorman, Chairman and CEO, took over, Amalga Composites was largely focused on making small tubing for electrical components like fuses, along with black amalgon tubing for pneumatic cylinders. "Low profit margin and lots of competition," is how Dorman, who rescued the company from bankruptcy, describes the small electrical component product line. Once 50 percent of the firm's business, that line is gone, while the pneumatic tubing line has expanded to 58 percent.



Wind turbine blade

Then there was the time, in the late '80s, when a full 50 percent of Amalga Composites' business was overwrapping compressed natural gas tanks for the automotive and trucking industries. The process increased the pressure capacity of the steel tanks from about 3,300 psi to 5,600 psi.

But times have changed, and that business has been dropped as well.

Still, despite an 18 percent drop in revenue when the Great Recession hit in 2009, Dorman says Amalga Composites has never failed to make money, even during economic downturns.

"2010 was a good year again, and this year will be even better," he said, adding that he expects to soon add to the company's current 60 or so employees.

The key, Dorman says, is his team of engineers, which keeps coming up with new ways to adapt the company's black amalgon, fiberglass/epoxy and carbon fiber tubing to meet the ever-changing needs of industry.

"The task is to think of how to replace metal when you need something high-strength, lightweight and non-corrosive," said Dorman.

That's how the company came to design torpedo-shaped containers to provide housing for electronic equipment for mapping ocean currents and taking scientific water measurements. The containers are pulled behind AUVs (autonomous underwater vehicles) and must be buoyant, waterproof, able to resist saltwater corrosion and strong enough to withstand the immense water pressure in deep waters. Increased oil and gas exploration and climate studies have boosted underwater scientific research.

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Amalga Composite's pneumatic tubes are used in the actuators of mining equipment. The company also makes pneumatic cylinder tubing used for railroad coal car components. It sees an uptick in business for both products whenever oil prices rise, as mining increases and companies switch to using more coal.

The Cash for Clunkers program produced a spurt in sales of components for non-magnetic and non-conductive parts for equipment that separates various metals from junked cars.

When a product is designed for one customer, "we start scouring the world for people who need a like item," said Dorman. Today, the small firm does more than 20 percent of its business in other nations, including Korea, China, Italy, Australia, Chile, Brazil and England.

One of the company's proudest new ventures is designing and manufacturing what it believes is a superior type of blade for wind turbines. It's also one of the few products that is finished in its entirety in West Allis. Using a method called resin transfer molding and the company's own blend of materials, the blades are designed to be lightweight, yet stronger, stiffer and more efficient, said Gregg Piper, vice president of engineering.

In addition to a creative engineering staff, Amalga Composites says its other big strength is its build-up of equipment over the years. It has 14 winding machines that wind fiber around steel mandrels ranging in diameter from 1 inch to 42 inches. The company has thousands of mandrels on hand, including tapered ones, most of them several feet long. It has eight ovens for heating epoxy resin, five grinders and an array of machining equipment. The capacity to complete large jobs on quick order and to manage multiple small specialized jobs simultaneously gives the firm a competitive edge, said Ty Roznowski, sales manager.

The company's key leaders also include Jack DeLuca, president and COO; and Chris Gramling, vice president of finance and purchasing.

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