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Town of Tonawanda firm helps fight graffiti

BY KEVIN PURDY

Features

Town of Tonawanda — Terrence Vargo spends a lot of time thinking of ways to abuse things.

Acids, lightning strikes, the spray from the sea and extreme temperatures — you name it, Vargo has probably exacted it upon any number of test products.

But while he's pretty good at testing all kinds of surfaces and materials, his customers — including the Department of Defense and camping gear sellers — are even better. So it helps that his Town of Tonawanda business, Integument Technologies Inc., pays its bills by selling linings and coatings that prevent that kind of abuse.

"A lot of work goes into it," Vargo said. "We make a lot of changes to every product during testing, based on what our testers are telling us ... things we might never have thought of."

While the nearly 10-year-old business has done well in protecting naval vessels and chemical furnace rooms, its most noticeable work, and perhaps greatest challenge, is just around the corner — literally.

The company has recently debuted a line of FluoroGrip films that can be put on signs, structures, equipment and other surfaces to protect against graffiti.

Paint sprayed on the clear film marbles up like rain on a newly waxed car and can be wiped off with a dry towel. The heart of the technology is Teflon, but making it adhesive, cheap and durable has taken nearly a decade of tinkering.

Integument has only pitched the product at trade shows, in industry publications and in meetings with municipal public works directors. The main competition is used in Europe's larger cities, so the U.S. field looks open to Vargo and his six employees on Pearce Avenue.

"We're competing against cheaper, disposable materials," said Jennifer Smyth, technical representative for Integument. "What we're selling is a high-performance application, and one that stays on."

The films, which also protect against dirt, rust, "bleaching" from UV radiation and other weathering, run for \$4 to \$7 per square foot. Volume discounts and product adjustments can be made to meet lower price points, Smyth said.

Vargo's business got its start from patents he helped develop that make Teflon into permanently adhesive films during his post-doctorate studies at the University at Buffalo's chemistry department.

Photos



James Neiss/staff photographer Tonawanda, NY - Terrence G. Vargo, president/ceo of Integument Technologies, Inc., left, and Jennifer Smyth, technical representative, demonstrate a graffiti resistant film the company manufactures. The company plans to market the film to municipalities and highway crews. **/Niagara Gazette** (Click for larger image)

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Military interests were the first to urge him to expand the use of what Vargo had originally envisioned as a kind of high-tech wallpaper.

"Erosion and rust is a \$25 billion problem for the Department of Defense," Vargo said. "You can see it's a market that can support a business that has a new idea."

The business got its start, and its name, from its earliest CEO and investor, Jamestown businessman William Daly. He had a logo in mind that involved two Is and a T, Vargo said, and ended up using Integument, based on the Latin root for "skin."

The company initially worked as a start-up looking to be bought out, but after Daly left to pursue other ventures, it found a primary private investor and has grown to include workers at a California production facility.

Vargo and his employees are also growing into a space just around the corner that's 4,000 square feet bigger.



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