

## AIDS gives Alabama condom maker new mission, bigger profits, better reputation

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By Jim Auchmutey

Dothan, Ala. --- When people used to ask Robert Martin what he did for a living, he braced himself for the inevitable wisecracks. "You run a condom factory?" men would repeat, mouths twitching. Then came the nudge to the ribs. "You need any testers?"

"The same line over and over," Martin says. "It bored me."

Martin is anything but bored these days. As president of Ansell Inc., he manages the nation's largest condom factory, and public concern over the AIDS epidemic has his production line humming. The plant is running full-tilt, seven days a week, three shifts a day, round-the-clock. The mere thought of this happy pace moves Martin to warble a line from the old calypso song: "All day, all night, Marianne."

Since January, when Surgeon General Everett Koop endorsed condoms as a precaution against AIDS, Ansell has increased production by 20 percent, to 2 million condoms a day, and has doubled its annual advertising budget to \$2.5 million. In a recent series of magazine ads, Ansell became the first major U.S. condom maker to mention the deadly viral disease by name.

This identification with medicine instead of contraception has instilled a new sense of mission among many of Ansell's 620 Dothan employees.

"I'm proud to work in a condom factory," says Jean Jones, a mother of three who conducts stretch tests. "I feel like we're doing something about AIDS, and that makes me feel good."

Attitudes weren't always so sensible. When the plant moved from Akron, Ohio, to southeast Alabama two decades ago, Martin says, the local people had a euphemism for the new industry: the shoe polish company. "People thought about condoms differently back then," he says.

At 55, Martin is no stranger to rubber goods, having headed his own urological supply company before coming to Ansell in 1979. A native of Rhode Island, he is a short, stocky man who ambles through the factory, patting employees on the back and chirping in a Yankee accent, "Hello, girls, is everybody happy?" Spying a pregnant woman, he looks her in the eye and says, "Didn't use one of ours, did you?"

But when he settles into his plush office to discuss the product, he speaks haltingly, carefully, as if he were pouring each sentence into a flask and swirling it in the light to check for sexual double entendres. "People don't have any conception of the capital investment and technology it takes to make a condom," he says.

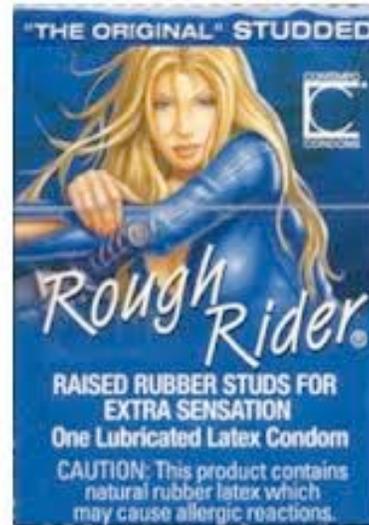
With that, Martin slips into a hairnet and a baby blue lab coat for a step-by-step tour of the manufacturing process. "We never used to have media interest," he says. "Now we do. We had a British TV crew in just recently. I think this is healthy."

First he steps into the display room for a look at the merchandise. A subsidiary of the Australian conglomerate Pacific Dunlop Ltd., Ansell ranks third in U.S. condom sales, behind the New York-based Carter-Wallace Inc., whose Trojans brand accounts for over half the market.

Ansell actually makes more condoms than Carter-Wallace, though; three-quarters of its production is sold to the U.S. government's Agency for International Development for birth control programs overseas. "They're the same models we sell in the United States," Martin says. "We have the Sultan in Egypt, the Rajah in Bangladesh, the Panther in Haiti, the Majestic in several countries."

The American versions are marketed under names ranging from Nuda and Contours to Stimula and Rough Rider. "That's our shady brand for sex shops," Martin says, absolutely straight-faced. "We don't make many of them."

The condoms come in blue, yellow, green and pink, as well as uncolored. The tinted models, which resemble carnival balloons, are not big sellers in the United States.



Contrary to popular thought, Martin says, condoms are not a one-size-fits-all product. There are two standard measures in the industry: Oriental (49 millimeters across) and Western (52 millimeters). He says there is a reason for this.

In a flat, professorial tone, Martin explains the condom's journey from raw materials to prophylactic. The process begins with latex, a milky liquid rubber extract imported from Indonesia and other tropical climes and shipped to Alabama in railroad tank cars. The basic form is made at a small Ansell plant in Troy, 40 miles northwest of Dothan, where chain-driven conveyor belts studded with glass molds move down production lines half the length of a football field. The molds are twice dipped in a pool of cool latex, then baked in a sequence of ovens. A jet of water separates the cooked membranes from their molds, and talc is added so the latex sheaths won't gum together. Then the goods are trucked to the Dothan plant.

That's where the high-tech task of quality control begins. Here, in a nondescript brick building in an industrial park deep in the heart of the Bible Belt, condoms are baked, burst, stretched, dissected, electrified, filled with water, and occasionally blown up by mouth.

The testing is crucial. It's not uncommon for customers facing unwanted pregnancies to sue condom companies, cases that often end in out-of-court settlements. "They don't use them the way they should be used," Martin says. "I know that to be the case, having been a user of condoms when I was younger."

In the water-check room, blank-faced women in lab smocks fit condom after condom on nozzles and examine them for leaks. In the corner a woman places condoms on air pumps, watches them inflate to the size of two watermelons and records the pressure at which they explode.

Across the hall, women measure condom strength on a machine called the Tensometer 10, which stretches a quarter-size piece of latex until it looks a two-foot strand of spaghetti. Computer readings clatter onto a printout. "Five thousand one hundred and ten pounds of pressure per square inch," Martin reads. "That's a good condom."

There's a chart on the wall listing the 65 countries where Ansell distributes, along with their differing regulatory specifications. Pakistan requires an air test, the United States doesn't. Some countries even insist that condom makers bake the finished product in an oven to simulate aging.

About one in 50 condoms is subjected to the water, tensile and air pressure tests. The only procedure every condom undergoes is the electrical pin hole check, carried out in a gymnasium-size room dominated by 40 carousel-looking machines. Workers surround them, slipping condoms on 10-inch stainless steel rods in a seamless motion that resembles milking a cow. Each one passes under an electrified steel mesh that sparks if there are any holes in the latex surface. This automatically prompts the steel rod to spurt air out the tip, shooting the defective item into a reject barrel. Ten percent of the products don't make the grade.

The surviving condoms are then loaded onto packing machines, which anoint them with medical-grade silicon oil and hermetically seal them in foil. The average shelf life is six years. More than 100 people per shift staff this room. They are not allowed to take samples for free, but can buy up to one gross of them --- 144 condoms --- once a month at cost.

All but three of the workers in this room are women, an employee profile that is common in the industry. Why are almost all condom testers women?

"They are more" --- Martin pauses to weigh his words --- "well, more adept at this sort of work."

Night foreman Sam Turner explains it from the viewpoint of the opposite sex. "I think most men are a little embarrassed by this."

Not that some of the women aren't. "At first the ladies are almost afraid to touch the condoms," Turner says. "Then maybe they just blush a little. Then they get to where it's like sewing on a button."

Or as lab supervisor Sylvia Stanford puts it, "After a while, a condom's a condom."

*Ansell's condom facility in Dothan closed in 2012.*