

All Abuzz About Ritchie Engineering

By Joanna R. Turpin
Of Distribution Center Staff

When Jack Ritchie first manufactured a bright-yellow refrigerant charging hose in 1949, he probably never dreamed that more than 60 years later, it would still be one of the most popular products offered by Ritchie Engineering Co. Inc., Bloomington, Minn. Thanks to its focus on integrity and quality, though, the company has grown its product line from that initial eye-catching hose to include a whole host of gauges, manifolds, vacuum pumps, recovery units, electronic instruments, and a variety of HVAC system tools under the brand name of Yellow Jacket®.

“We have a reputation for integrity,” said Mike Lanners, vice president, domestic sales and marketing. “We’re well known within the industry because we have done a great job of developing products, being a leader, and manufacturing a lot of high-quality products.”



LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Creating new and innovative products is a cornerstone of Ritchie Engineering, which is why its product development team is continually researching and developing cutting-edge tools and testing equipment to fill industry needs. As Lanners noted, “We are always looking to add to our line of service tools, whether it’s adding features to existing tools or coming out with the latest and greatest new products.”

In the last year, Ritchie Engineering has introduced three products as a result of this extensive research and development. The first product, a hydraulic tube expander, allows contractors to expand tubing with one-hand and eliminate fittings, thus saving time and money. As Lanners noted, the ease of use of this tool is significant over the manually operated type of swaging tools that are often used in the field.

Another innovative tool is the new H₂ electronic leak detector. Typically when technicians look for leaks in a system, they will use refrigerant as a tracer to locate the leak. There are now laws over-



An employee makes sure wiring is installed to specification on the Ritchie Engineering recovery manufacturing line in Bloomington, Minn.

seas (and some in the United States) prohibiting the practice of using refrigerant as a tracer, due to ozone-depleting chemicals within most refrigerants. “With the H₂ electronic leak detector, an environmentally friendly gas mixture (95 percent nitrogen and 5 percent hydrogen) is used to detect leaks — up to less than 5 ppm,” said Lanners. “As this new law gains momentum throughout the U.S., our H₂ leak detector is ready and available.”

The third recently introduced product is the heat pump manifold, which features two 800 psi gauges that can read all heat pump pressure conditions. As Lanners explained, traditional low-side manifold gauges can be susceptible to damage when heat pumps go into heating mode. Because the low-side gauge of the heat pump manifold is also designed for pressures up to 800 psi, it can read the pressure whether the pump is in heating mode, cooling mode, or transition.



Yellow Jacket hoses are cut and proper fittings are applied to each end at the Bloomington, Minn. production facility.

While Lanners won't tip his hand as to what other new products Ritchie Engineering will be offering in the near future, he said that the company "is always looking at improving existing tools, as well as adding new and innovative service tools."



EDUCATION, CUSTOMER SERVICE

When Ritchie Engineering introduces a product, its network of independent manufacturer representatives ensures their authorized HVACR wholesalers are first to receive detailed information about the newest Yellow Jacket offering. Product update bulletins are posted on the company's website, and a quarterly newsletter called The Buzz also contains information about new and existing tools and test equipment.

To promote best practices in the industry, Ritchie Engineering offers Yellow Jacket University (YJU): A Buzzing Campus for HVACR Education and Information, which is an online educational tool for both contractors and wholesalers. The online tool contains training videos that cover refrigeration system analyzers, refrigerant recovery, evacuation and charging, and tubing tools, as well as "quick tip" videos. A current list of articles is also available at YJU, covering everything from selecting the right tools for a job to preparing for R-410A. Those visiting the site can comment, ask questions, and engage in discussions with fellow technicians on every article. Site visitors are also encouraged to share product improvement ideas, new product suggestions, as well as customer service and website suggestions.

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Lanners noted that those who view the training videos can test themselves on the content, and if they pass the online test, Ritchie Engineering will send them a certificate, noting that they passed YJU. "We also put all 'graduates' into a pool, and each quarter, we randomly draw names and award nice prizes to the winners."



Top Right: Knobs are applied to manifold bars in the test and charging manifold production department in Bloomington, Minn.

Top Left: Ritchie Engineering's Series 41 manifolds are lined up and waiting for packaging.

Besides offering extensive educational opportunities, Ritchie Engineering prides itself on providing superb customer service. As Lanners noted, "Our very knowledgeable customer service department is staffed with live personnel who pick up the phone and can answer every question. That's a big selling point of who we are — that personal touch."

In addition, the company's manufacturer's representatives, many of whom have been with the company for 30-plus years, spend as much face-to-face time with distributors as possible. This includes participating in Counter Days and Open Houses, but most enjoyably, Vacuum Pump Days. "On these days, we set up in the wholesaler's parking lot, and we'll change the oil in their customers' vacuum pumps for no charge, no matter which manufacturer's pump they have," said Lanners. "We also talk to contractors about how to maintain their pumps. It's a nice service that works very well to pull in customers for the wholesalers."

While wholesalers appreciate the educational opportunities and customer service that Ritchie Engineering offers, it's the quality of the tools that keeps them stocking the Yellow Jacket brand, said Lanners. "Our products are desired by technicians because of their robustness and quality — they stand the test of time. Quality is the number one feature that has helped us sustain for 60-plus years. Wholesalers also like that 90 percent of our orders are shipped within 48 hours and that our exchange/warranty policy is very fair."

Going forward, Lanners noted that Ritchie Engineering plans to keep doing what it does best — educate customers, manufacture high-quality tools, and operate with the highest level of integrity. 