

"Folks say it matters, but they vote with their wallets, and that means cheaper trumps origin every time," Drnec said. "When cowboys drive Hondas and wear jeans made in Guatemala, shirts sewn in Vietnam with boots on their feet from China ... well, I guess that shows where our values as a nation live.

"You'd think the Western business would be the last bastion of stalwart patriots that care who their sales dollars ultimately go to support, but they don't anymore," Drnec added.

Companies sometimes use their Made in America status as a marketing tool for their products. Does it work?

Tri-Tronics, an Arizona-based manufacturer of electronic collars for dogs and horses, recently ran advertising in sporting dog magazines highlighting its American roots.

"We received an amazing response to the ad," said Pi Polletta, marketing manager for the company. "People typically don't take the time to call and tell you they liked what they saw, but with this ad, they did."

Polletta said her company's decision to manufacture in the United States makes it the most expensive option for those purchasing electronic collars.

"Quite simply, we could build overseas and sell at a price equal to our competitors, but that would mean we would be selling a product that is also equal in quality to our competitors," Polletta said.

For John Nunn, president of Nunn Finer in Pennsylvania, the issue is also quality.

"All our strapgoods are manufactured in the United States from American-made leather and materials, except for the hardware," Nunn said. "We can control the quality and deliver premium goods. That's our number-one goal."

He said his company is also able to better control its costs "since we don't have the fluctuations of foreign currency and shipping expenses."

Some manufacturers believe that over time, overseas manufacturers will be able to copy virtually any product produced in the United States, matching the quality exactly. It's particularly troubling for smaller companies.

Electric Cleaner Co. of Wisconsin manufactures the Electro Groom and Rapid Groom horse products.

"We have not seen any products from overseas that will compete with these two units," said Trevor Vold, sales manager for the company. "One wonders how long it will be before the quality of these machines is as good as ours because they do have the materials."

The overseas versions of the company's products sell for about half what Electric Cleaner Co. charges. The company is contacted regularly by companies willing to manufacture the product overseas.

"Hopefully, we won't have to tell our loyal employees that they are out of a job," Vold said. "It's a bad situation for companies that have been in business for years with the same employees. Jobs are being lost, and some companies will not survive the cheap labor overseas if they don't slash wages considerably."

A number of companies in the industry have tried offshore manufacturing and decided it didn't work for them.

Apple Picker imported its products for about a year.

"The returns and complaints were too much for our quality name to handle," said Brandon Tackett, a spokesman for the company. "So, this year, we have brought production back to our shop in Tempe, Ariz., to make the world's only U.S. made metal manure fork."

Tackett said the move drove up the price, "but overall, we have seen the demand maintain strong."

Professional's Choice Sports Medicine Products also tried overseas manufacturing and discovered it worked with some portions of its product line but not with others.

"We insisted that the products be manufactured to our exact specifications, but we found little modifications designed to boost productivity that altered the product just enough so our customers noticed," said Dal Scott, owner of the California-based company.

Demand, however, forced Scott to consider other options. The company is

now cutting its own products and providing them in kit form to a maquiladora in Mexico, where they are assembled for quick turnaround.

Maquiladoras are assembly plants generally located near the United States border. Scott said the plant his company is using is close enough to his home base that he can travel there in an hour for inspection or to trouble-shoot.

Stan Dill, CEO of Saddle Bums Co. in California, estimates his company could produce its products offshore for about a fourth of what it pays to have them made in the United States.

"It certainly decreases our short-term profit margin, but this is our choice," Dill said.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- Most retailers aren't convinced that "Made in America" always means that the product is the best on the market.
- Retailers believe they are forced to compete on price by their competition and tend to discount the idea that service and knowledge of their customers' needs are unique enough offerings to make up for a cheaper price.
- Manufacturers believe a key to continuing to producing American-made products is less government intervention in and regulation of the manufacturing process.