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Dental supplier Microbrush expands to meet demand for at-home diagnostics kits

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As school began this fall and with borders opening to travelers, over-the-counter, rapid COVID-19 tests are in high demand.

Dental supplier Microbrush International, owned by Young Innovations Inc., is investing more than \$20 million to expand its capacity to package sterile testing swabs for COVID testing and hopes to branch out to other at-home testing technologies becoming popular amid the pandemic.

COVID has driven "a change in diagnostics technology," John Frymark, vice president of product development and strategy at Young Innovations, told *Plastics News*. Many companies debuted new technologies for at-home test kits under the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's emergency use authorization last year.

"It's going to go beyond COVID testing," as the telehealth industry continues to grow, he said. "Everything from cancer detection to STD testing and anything that would go through the historical lab chain.

"We've gotten a lot of inquiries [for rapid test kits] from various companies about [new] applications," he added.

"It's going to be a revolution for the diagnostics market," Frymark said. "To go from a test that would take 24 to 48 hours and cost \$150 to get processed, to now, something you can do in 15 minutes for \$20 or \$30."

The testing swabs are "one of the first things that became a supply constraint" when the pandemic reached the U.S. in 2020, he said.

Before then, Microbrush was already making 700 million to 800 million swabs annually for dental applications, often used to apply adhesives that act as a filling for cavities. Now it produces "well over" 1 billion swabs annually, Frymark said.

The company partnered with Procter & Gamble Co.'s [Imflux](#) to design the longer stems needed for testing swabs.

"We had the technology at the ready," he said. "Given the overlap and exact fit in our production capabilities, we've been able to sustain it as an extension of our business."

Microbrush also developed an automated, sterile packaging system as demand rose in 2020, Frymark said. It previously had been sending them out to a contract packager.

The company's new in-house, automated packaging equipment will operate at a location close to its 42,000-square-foot Grafton, Wis., plant that was previously used for warehousing, according to John Baeten, director of business process optimization at Young Innovations.

The expansion, which included a retrofit of the warehouse space, adds 32,000 square feet to Microbrush's operations and is expected to be fully operational before the end of 2021, Baeten said.

"As a dental manufacturer, [Microbrush is] FDA regulated," he said. "We have all of the [good manufacturing processes] ... to ensure we have quality products that are safe and effective. To go into the medical space and divert from dental is really a natural extension of what we do every day."

Microbrush continues to receive inquiries for custom designs for diagnostic products and plans to increase capacity to meet that need, Baeten added.