

# The king of liftgates

A yellow and black nameplate marks the presence of one the Maxon's liftgates, ubiquitous on trucks worldwide. Maxon has been the leader in the liftgate industry for 50 years, in part because the company goes out of its way to provide solutions to customers' problems.

Text and photos Dwight Cendrowski

Nothing is left to chance at Maxon, where innovation often is a result of customer requests.

In 1957, just two years after the world famous Disneyland amusement park opened in Anaheim, California, another iconic name was born 10 miles up the road. Maxon Lift Corporation was the brainchild of Max Lugash, who developed the world's first liftgate to fold up under a truck body. This innovative liftgate is known as the Tuk-A-Way, and it is still the most popular and best-selling liftgate in the world. Designed to fasten at the rear of a truck or trailer, it smoothly lowers a platform from the

trailer bed down to the ground. Originally cranked with muscle power, most lifts now use sophisticated hydraulic systems to move the platform. This year marks Maxon's 50th anniversary, and the company continues to dominate the liftgate market, producing a wide variety of liftgates for smaller pickups up to the largest trailers.

Today Maxon remains a family company, as are the majority of companies in this industry. It is based in Santa Fe Springs, in sunny southern California, and the road leading to its headquarters has tall, stately palm trees lining the center boulevard. Maxon is now headed by a third generation of the family and is the largest privately held manufacturer of liftgates in the world. The company employs about 500 people worldwide, and its customer base includes leasing and truck rental companies, overnight delivery fleets and the country's largest corporate trucking fleets. Maxon's yellow and black nameplate can be found rolling down just about any street in the United States. Always an innovator, Maxon brought the rail style liftgate to the U.S. in the 1970s and now produces many specialized liftgates to handle unique cargo or to fit one-of-a-kind trucks. Its top of the line, and one of the most sophisticated liftgates in existence, is the Columnlift, the BMR series that this year has begun using a Haldex self-contained power unit. Available with either a steel or an aluminum platform and made to handle up to 6,600 pounds of cargo, the Columnlift features a long list of improvements that have made it one of Maxon's best-selling lifts.

Maxon stays in the lead in this industry by focusing on engineering innovation, often driven by customer requests. The company even has a special order request team that



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→ develops unique solutions for customers. Joe Aguilera is the Maxon purchasing manager. He explains how the company developed cart stops to solve an annoying problem for some customers. “There are customers, like in the bakery industry or pizza delivery business, where they have very light carts with a propensity for rolling out, and we provided a custom solution to that problem,” he says.

Engineering support and research and development are keys to staying ahead in this very competitive business says Sherry Lafferty, Maxon’s engineering manager in its Santa Fe Springs Tech Center. She cites improvements such as bearings that are manufactured for low maintenance and without need for grease and platforms made with aluminum extrusions for added strength and less weight. “We’ve changed spring sizes, added torsion bars, changed design in opener arms,” explains Aguilera. “We’re constantly opti-

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*Joe Aguilera*



mizing it to make it more robust, more user-friendly, more functional.”

The original Tuk-A-Way liftgate has evolved from its original 1957 design into a marvel of modern technology. The popular GPTLR series has a smooth, level ride from truckbed to ground, a roller design to make unfolding easier and an exclusive load guidance system. And it’s customizable to fit any size truck and application.

**THE MOST IMPORTANT** relationships for Maxon are with its distributors across North America. Numbering perhaps 200, these companies sell to end users and install the liftgates. To keep their distributors/installers up to date, Maxon regularly conducts Technical Service Town Hall Training sessions at their customers’ facilities. The 25-strong Maxon sales force offers this complementary training to ensure that distributors have the latest instructions for installing, operating and maintaining liftgates. In addition, Maxon distributors keep spare parts across North America, ready for next-day delivery.

Noting the challenge of satisfying a wide range of customers, Aguilera says, “We have very novice users to very sophisticated users ... so we have to make it very user friendly so someone who has no experience with the gate will be able to operate it properly.”

In the technical center a short distance from corporate headquarters, designers huddle over computer screens, working on new designs and improvements to current lifts. And in the testing lab, technicians use advanced computer equipment to test lift prototypes for stress and load parameters. On this bright summer day in the test facility, tech-



nician Nikolay Spassou conducts a load test on a GPT lift. The liftgate performs its duty while Spassou monitors the results on his computer screen.

Here in the R & D department Maxon engineers have conducted research to support the development of a more durable paint finish to resist corrosion, subjecting painted surfaces to 5,000 hours of salt-spray abuse. A new challenge is the growing use of magnesium chloride by cities trying to keep their roads ice-free. The chemical is more corrosive to liftgate components, leading Lafferty and her team to look at radical improvements in paint, electrical and pump seals and control circuits.

Anton Griesner is the vice president for marketing and business development for Maxon. He boasts, "The dedication and talent of the people you find at Maxon is astonishing. You're amazed on a day-to-day basis how much passion, heart and soul you find in our people for this product." While primarily a North American company, Maxon also sells units in Central and South America. Griesner points to the newest effort to expand his company's reach. It has received CE certification for sales in Europe, and in April of this year the company began shipping liftgates to Britain. Maxon sees Europe as a new and exciting market for its products.

Another addition to the Maxon line is a wheelchair lift called the Smart Lift. Designed from the ground up to be compliant with U.S. federal motor vehicle safety standards, it joins a long list of innovations for this company, starting with that first Tuk-A-Way in 1957. "We want to stay the No. 1 liftgate manufacturer," says Lafferty, "and be the innovator, pushing the others." ■



## An uplifting cooperation

**IN JUNE OF THIS YEAR** Haldex began shipping self-contained, power up-gravity down power units to Maxon Lift for the BMR-A Columnlift Series lifts. Initial production is already up to 50 units per week in both single and dual pump configurations. And that rate will increase as Haldex engineers and production people streamline and fine-tune the process.

But it's been anything but an overnight success, explains Ron Spooner, Haldex's West Coast sales manager. Seeing that Maxon had been buying pumps, blower, filters and other components from many different sources, Spooner saw an opening for Haldex and its self-contained power units. He began talking to Maxon about four years ago and has nurtured the relationship ever since. "The solution was that we provide the complete unit to them, and they have one place to go for warranty considerations ... rather than half a dozen," explains Spooner.

The Haldex sales group is certainly not alone in securing this important new customer. It's taken the concerted efforts of applications/engineering and the production department as well as a firm commitment from management. Explains Spooner, "Our applications design group deserves a lot of credit for the success of this program. Their design work, and actually taking Maxon's design and improving upon it as we provided prototypes, went a long way in selling this program to them."

While not usually visible on a truck, the lift's power unit is the heart of the system. Contained in one neat box are the motor, pump, switches and hydraulics that provide the power when a truck's lift is raised, plus the power to lower it on the power down version.

Representatives from both companies call the relationship between Maxon and Haldex a good marriage, combining Maxon's industry-leading lift technology with Haldex's expertise in hydraulics. And now, with Maxon looking to expand into Britain, it's an even better fit. "One of the reasons [Maxon] was interested in working with us is because of our worldwide presence," says Spooner. He then ticks off more reasons for a successful relationship: The solid reputation of the Haldex name. People dedicated to repair and service of units and components. Replacement parts available immediately where needed. And innovative design work all the way down the line. ■