

Technology keeps company ahead of the competition

By MATT KELSEY
mkelsey@cebridge.net
Forum Managing Editor

In a time when the American manufacturing industry is shrinking at an alarming rate and losing business to overseas companies, the LMP Steel & Wire Company in Maryville has managed to sustain long-term growth.

According to company officials, that growth has been made possible in part by hard-working, dedicated employees and a worker-friendly, safe atmosphere. But also, LMP has managed to stay on the cutting edge through periodic technology upgrades in the way they process raw steel into steel rods and wire.

Kevin Van de Ven, president of LMP since 1997, said much of the new equipment in recent years

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uses laser technology to make precision adjustments in the process, where in the past the adjustments were made by hand.

"Now that's a fully automated process," Van de Ven said. "It allows us to double our productivity in certain areas."

In fact, one piece of equipment - which makes cold-finished steel bars - is the most advanced machine of its kind anywhere in the world.

"This is the newest generation," Van de Ven said. "Somebody will get ahead of us, but this is the latest technology available in the world right now, and it's right here in Maryville."

Although technology is guiding LMP into the future, the company also has a long and rich history.

LMP started out as Lloyd Metal Products in 1958 making fasteners to fit metal pipes together. Later

other products, including bolts, connection bands and corrugated metal culverts, were added.

In 1968, LMP purchased its first "straighten and cut" machine to move it into the cold-finished steel bar market, which is still its staple today. The company has dropped Lloyd from its name and simply goes by LMP.

Rare in manufacturing - or any business - these days, LMP is still individually owned. All company operations take place in Maryville, and LMP executives don't report to supervisors at a larger parent company.

Van de Ven said LMP will have a year-long 50th anniversary celebration in 2008 to honor the company's history.

Corrin Martin, vice president of human resources, has been a part of the company for over
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a third of that history. When she started with the company in 1984 LMP had about 85 employees. Today, about 155 people work there.

"There have been innumerable changes" since she started, Martin said. "We've seen building expansion, new equipment added, and a big increase in our value-added processes."

To make cold-finished steel bars and wire, LMP buys raw steel from hot roll mills, then they process the steel by reducing the width. The end product is sold to manufacturers across the country through eight outside sales reps. Most of the company's sales take place west of the Mississippi River.

LMP seems to be rare in its industry - an American manufacturer that is actually growing and thriving.

"Manufacturing is under attack in this country," Van de Ven said. "Employment has been dwindling. When you go Christmas shopping, you're hard pressed to find an item made in the USA. That's a lot different than when we were kids."

Van de Ven said U.S. manufacturing is threatened by low-cost producers overseas who may be cutting corners when it comes to quality and environmental control and worker safety. That is where American manufacturers stand out, he said.

But to compete, U.S. factories must streamline their operations in the future.

"Our manufacturing base here is going to have to continue to embrace lean philosophies, eliminate waste and make sure that we stay globally competitive," he said.

Locally, Van de Ven said LMP and Maryville's other manufacturers have a cordial relationship, and in fact help each other often. This can be attributed to the fact that the companies are not competing directly against each other, but instead are trying to sustain Maryville as a viable manufacturing center. Van de Ven said he often seeks advice from his peers in the industry.

"Our local industry here is a big network," he said. "We share manufacturing philosophies with Kawasaki. We talked with Energizer about the STAR award they received from OSHA. We talked about a housekeeping initiative with Federal Mogul. We discussed mentoring and training programs with NEBS."

"A good manufacturing base is important. It creates good consumers. It's just good for the local economy."

"Our communication with other industries to help us get better has been extremely helpful. The fact that we are able to share back and forth helps the employees."

Those employees are also essential to LMP's success, but Van de Ven said technology is helping them get better at their jobs.

For sales reps, new technology has given them the ability to dial up inventory information with a few key strokes, making the selling process easier.

For factory workers, technology has allowed for more precision since more information can pass from person to person more quickly.

"They have more information about the product they're making," Martin said.

"Now they have desktop screens available that tell them specifically about each product and who it's being made for," Van de Ven said.

Technology has also made the jobs safer and less physically demanding.

That's especially important at LMP, which retains employees, often for decades at a time. Currently, LMP has about 15 employees who have been with the company over 30 years.

Technology is helping those employees, alongside the newcomers, change in a shifting market.

"Our employees have to make a series of adjustments continuously to meet consumer expectations," Van de Ven said. "That's why it's so great that we have highly skilled operators. They're artisans."