

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Friday, December 22, 2000

Metal fabricator recasts itself into modern mold

By Mike Boyer

The Cincinnati Enquirer

The loss of three major machine tool customers more than a year ago was a challenge for Cast-Fab Technologies Inc., a foundry and metal fabrication shop in Oakley.

The company, spun off from the former Cincinnati Milacron Inc. 13 years ago, counted on the machine tool market for most of its metal fabrication business. That represented as much as 40 percent of its annual sales, which approach \$45 million.

Cast-Fab managers went to work pursuing customers in several new markets including the rail industry, heavy trucks and mining and even refrigeration and waterworks valves.

Today, the company has recovered much of lost sales and broadened its customer base, said Ross Bushman, vice president of sales and planning.

"This year we have probably added 10 new accounts," he said. "Typically in the past we had 20 customers who represented 90 percent of our sales."

"All things considered, 2000 has been a pretty good year," he said. Despite concerns about the economy slowing and recession looming, "we're optimistic about 2001."

It was a different story in late 1998 and 1999.

The company relied on the plastics and machine tool industry for much of its fabrication work — building machine bases, cabinets and guarding for a variety of manufacturers.

But a slowdown in the machine tool market and

Asia's economic problems prompted three Japanese tool builders to close their American operations. Those companies represented as much as 60 percent of Cast-Fab's fabrication work.

"We, at that point, began reinventing ourselves," said Mr. Bushman — son of James Bushman who, with businessman Wayne Carlisle, bought Milacron's old foundry business in 1988.

The company was forced to lay off about 40 employees. It has since recalled a few and employment is about 300.

"We hope we've lived through the tough times," said Mr. Bushman. "It wasn't fun there for a while."

Cast-Fab is unusual in that it does both metal fabrication and metal casting of components up to 80,000 pounds under the same roof. Those two businesses typically compete.

"We like to joke we can compete with ourselves. Usually in the foundry business, fabrication is a dirty word," Mr. Bushman said.

Tying the two businesses together is an engineering department that can help customers design products more efficiently and take cost out of the components.

"High volume on any part number for us in a year is 500-600," said Mr. Bushman. "We like to get in and really get to know the customer. That's the only way we can leverage up our engineering capacity."

One of Cast-Fab's first successes outside of the machine tool market was fabricating electrical cabinets for locomotives. The first customer was Siemens Energy



The Cincinnati Enquirer/GARY LANDERS

Building an electrical control cabinet at Cast-Fab are Rob Neeley (left foreground) and Tom Kiefer. This piece of equipment will be used in earth-moving equipment.

and Automation outside Atlanta.

The company has also been assembling 10-foot tall cabinets for the electrical controls in large mining shovels.

Even before it began looking for new customers, Cast-Fab began developing a cellular manufacturing setup in its fabrication shop. Instead of an assembly-line setup, where an operation is performed and the part handed off to the next worker, a small team handles assembly from start to finish.

Cellular assembly eliminates a lot of part handling and partially completed inventory.

"Cellular was response to the business challenges we faced," said Mr. Bushman. "They weren't as much volume, repetitive business that we could set up in an assembly line atmosphere."

"These parts needed to be set in one area and have one team go from start to finish in the assembly process. If you make a mistake in putting some of these parts together, you might not know it for three days until you're near the end and you don't have enough

room for a piece."

The cellular setup wasn't a big adjustment for fabrication workers because they designed it, Mr. Bushman said.

"This was a team effort from the shop floor. We had 14-15 guys looking at how we would organize it," he said. "They researched and talked to different equipment suppliers."

This fall Cast-Fab hired Midwest Manufacturing Solutions, a Cincinnati manufacturing improvement firm, to further streamline its product and process flow.

"They're better off than most companies," said Ray Attiyah, Midwest president, "They've done a lot of things right over the years. They're a good company that wants to get better."

Copyright © 2000, Cincinnati Enquirer
Reprinted with permission.

CAST-FAB
TECHNOLOGIES

3040 Forrer St., Cinti., OH 45209
Ph: 513-758-1000 Fx: 513-758-1002

E-mail: sales@cast-fab.com
Web Site: <http://www.cast-fab.com>