

Brains and Brawn Poise Stamper for Growth

Using integrated shop-management software for brains and an upgraded pressroom-equipment lineup for brawn, Buffalo stamper P&G Steel Products has its path to longevity all laid out.

BY BRAD F. KUVIN, EDITOR

P&G Steel Products Company has been a core manufacturing player in Buffalo, NY, growing up with the city alongside other large companies, such as Westinghouse, P&G's initial stamping customer back in the 1950s. No one can argue, though, that the stamping business today is not what it once was. Therefore, building for the future, as P&G management aims to do, requires a fresh perspective.

"The market for 100- to 600-ton stampings has been rung out," says Jim Riley, P&G president. "Stampings have become a commodity, forcing us to grow by branching out into other areas."

Growth has come to P&G from its efforts to consolidate its customers' processes into its own business plan. P&G actively investigates upstream and downstream operations at its customers' plants to look for opportunities to take on more work—either value-added processes with stampings such as assembly, or activities such as packaging and shipping.



The P&G parts board includes these automotive transmission parts (middle row), some previously fineblanked by a competitor. P&G stamps them, of 5-mm-thick steel, using in-die shaving to attain the fineblank-like tolerances where needed.

A turning point for the company came in 1999, we're told by Andy Ponkow, director of business development, who joined the Ponkow-family-owned company in 2001 to help lead its renewed commitment to growth.

"In 1999, when my father bought the business from his partner, management redirected the organization to ensure that we were growing for the future. In addition to learning how we can do more for our customers, we've since that time invested more than \$3 million to upgrade our pressroom, without adding a single press. Rather, we've upgraded controls (Wintress SmartPacs) and coil feeders (Coe ServoMasters) for example, and continue to do so on a regular basis. And, we operate smarter and more efficiently by utilizing the features of our manufacturing software system (Vista, from Epicor Software Corp.)"

Evolving to Meet Customer Needs

When Andy Ponkow joined P&G, he brought not only a master's degree and practical marketing experience, but also vim and vigor to spark sales and development efforts.

"While stamping is our core business," he says, "we want to understand the businesses and markets of our customers, understand their needs and find ways in which we can become better assets to them. We've been working to consolidate processes inhouse for our customers, where it makes sense."

For example, Ponkow describes an automated manufacturing cell it has run for three years. The cell machines forged parts that P&G receives from its customer, and then conveys the parts from the machining operation to a punching/stamping operation and on to final wash and tumbling. P&G designed and developed the entire process, and invested in the equipment for the line, all to provide a turnkey solution for its customer.

"We have another stamping cus-



An automatic destacker from HMS feeds welded banks into a Clearing 500-ton press, equipped with a servo-mechanical transfer (also HMS), to form television picture-tube frames. P&G recently upgraded the press controls to the latest Wintriss SmartPac, and also connects a Cieco RamMaster control for shut-height adjustment as insurance against a crash during die setup.

tomor," continues Ponkow, "where we continued to question it to learn the next steps in its processes. We wanted to know what the customer did with our stampings, used in oil-pan gaskets for automotive engines, and to see if maybe we couldn't improve efficiency by performing some of the operations ourselves. We learned that our customer was taking our stampings and installing compression limiters into them using a ringing operation. We studied the process, and that customer eventually gave us its ringing equipment. It's been running here for two years now."

Yet another customer has P&G packaging and shipping complete aftermarket packages for the HVAC market. "We stamp gas-burner parts," says Ponkow, "then weld, assemble, package and ship complete packages to our customer, ready to turn around to its customers."

Pressroom Growth Spawns ERP-Software Investment

Knowing which value-added processes make economic sense, and managing these often complex projects from start to finish, has P&G leaning heavily on its Vista integrated enterprise-resource-planning (ERP) software. It purchased the software in 1998 following sub-

stantial growth in its pressroom capabilities through much of the 1990s. The 65,000-sq.-ft. plant employs 60, including 34 direct laborers (setup and production) and 12 indirect (quality, maintenance, toolroom and shipping). It runs 20 presses, including 500- and 600-ton machines.

"During the '90s we added a lot of new equipment," recalls Riley, "when one of our customers, Allied Signal, closed its stamping plant in Toronto and moved all of its pressroom equipment here. We inherited four large straightside presses—a pair of 400-ton and a pair of 200-ton presses—as well as two 150-ton OBI presses, plus feeding equipment, a vibratory deburring and cleaning system, and 400 dies. Along with the equipment came \$5 million of business, which we kept for two years until Allied Signal moved the dies to Brazil. At that time, we purchased all of the equipment and opened the door to plenty of new growth opportunities."

"Our IT infrastructure with Vista," adds Ponkow, "has allowed us to actively seek growth opportunities that make sense for us. We're able to perform specified and selective quoting and find opportunities that fit our capabilities." Epicor offers Vista in several modules

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P&G receives these forged axle flanges from its customer and, in one cell, machines the edges, then, using a conveyor to link the machining center to a 400-ton Clearing press, punches out the center hole. Steel thickness is $\frac{5}{8}$ in.

covering sales, e-business (EDI), production, material management and financial management. P&G uses Vista to manage its orders, quotes, shipping and receiving, production, advanced bill of materials, inventory, purchasing, accounts payable and receivable, and its general ledger.

Leaning on Automotive, But Not Too Much

P&G fits the mold of a medium- to heavy-volume stamper, providing some automotive stampings, for example, at volumes to 4.5 million per year, yet other lower-volume stampings at annual part counts of 5000. It serves the television picture-tube market, stamping tube frames at annual volumes of 1 million. When it lost one tube-frame customer in 2002, it took on more automotive work to make up the difference—three of the company's four largest new projects early in 2003 had it stamping automotive parts, taking its percentage of automotive work from 40 to 58 percent.

"This new automotive work, much of it large and complex stampings," says Ponkow, "has helped us combat foreign competition, due to the size and complexity of the work—a 4-ft.-long frame cross-member for example."

On a pressroom tour, we viewed TV picture-tube frame stamping of welded blanks. For larger tubes, 32- and 36-in., P&G has begun to weld two L-shaped blanks together into a square before forming the final shape in a four-station transfer die, rather than form the shape out of one large square sheetmetal blank. This saves a bundle of scrap. P&G plasma-arc welds the blanks, of 20-gauge



coil stock, in an automated setup at

400 per hour.

Blanking the frame halves, we spied an obvious benefit the firm has realized from its investment in servo feeds. "We have purchased six servo feeds so far," says Ponkow. "On the blanking line, we nearly doubled production by switching from air feeds to servo, because of the limited feed speed of the air feed. We have gone from 40 strokes/min. to 70 on

the blanking press.

"Switching to servo feeds also has made our setups more efficient," continues Ponkow. "We used to employ as many as eight setup people. Now we have three, allowing us to move these trained people into other areas of the plant." MF