

In Mercury Speciality Products lasertube changed
the way of making business

Looking over the horizon

Job shop

INSPIRED FOR TUBE



Mike Lee's mission is to spread the gospel of "innovation with tube" into the mid-continent market of North America. Lee has never really stopped transforming his Winnipeg tube fabrication company, Mercury specialty Products (MSP). The 24-person shop has become a specialty powerhouse in the region supplying the agricultural equipment, transportation, lawn care and general manufacturers. Now Lee is determined to position his operation to be on the vanguard of the coming wave in industrial tube design.

"I want to show people how to build a better building with tube, a better piece of furniture with tube, show people how to make all sorts of creative products from tube," said Lee.

Having become one of the early adapters of BLM's revolutionary laser tube cutting equipment the issue for Lee is now more about leveraging the design possibilities for his clients than it is a concern about the capital expense. "My BLM tube lasers have changed the way I want to do business," Lee said. Showing a visitor his BLM multi-axis tube laser system Lee seems far more excited about the potential for what he can do for his clients than he is about what it might mean to his own company.

Lee transitioned MSP from a supplier of commod-

ity product like handrails and grab-bars for health care facilities into a high quality parts supplier for the booming bus building business that Winnipeg is now the North American centre for. Uncompromising customers in that sector and others has made MSP capable of taking on the most innovative projects for the most demanding customers regardless of whether they are equipment makers in the U.S. Midwest, or the most cutting edge design houses of Europe or the Far East.

His experience also taught him that he couldn't rely on the things that made the company successful yesterday for its future. Using the nimbleness only available to operations that are MSP's size, in the last five years he has re-oriented the company to focus on supplying the thriving agricultural equipment industry. It's that kind of industry awareness has allowed MSP to achieve a 30 per cent compound annual growth rate since he's owned the company.

Although commodity price downturns has seriously hurt the North American mining and the forestry sectors in 2008-09, agricultural commodities have held their own and MPS has ridden the wave.

"What started me on this venture (to move his company into the forefront of the market in innovative tube processing) is that we have been the bene-





ficiary of a unique market sector for the last five years," he said. "The ag market has been very good to us. The growth has been spectacular, the opportunities have been tremendous. But I knew we had to start working aggressively to figure out what life holds for us after ag."

At first he wasn't certain what that would be but a trip to Europe this spring helped convince him that there was a world of opportunity out there in new product design that used formed and processed tube to a much greater degree than the North American market had known. Since the company has now invested many millions of dollars in state-of-the-art equipment, Lee believes his company's future will at least partially depend on product innovation. "One of the most important aspects of Mike's com-

pany is that he has the vision," said Jim Rutt, president and chief operating officer of BLM Group USA. "I think he is on the right track. Many of the other folks in the technology are somewhat content to just use the technology to fabricate product using existing designs. Mike is thinking over the horizon."

Economy and aesthetics

Lee is going out of his way to plant the idea of using tube in the design of some significant public buildings that are in the works in his region. He meets with architects and designers when he can to make sure they are aware of the possibilities. "I want to get the level of awareness up about how we are innovating in tube," said Lee. "Then perhaps others will share the same vision I have."

Using the efficiency improvements his latest BLM automatic loading laser tube cutters provide in tighter tolerance and accuracy, reduction in downstream assembly costs, reduction in scrap and the tremendous gains in labour productivity, Lee is convinced the economics and esthetics of the latest design work in tube can be a winning combination.

"In the long run the truly most important contribution this technology can make is in the efficiency it opens up providing additional degrees of design freedom to product designers," Rutt said. "That is the aspect Mike is trying to develop and promote. He is at the forefront of that in Canada."



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