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Salute the Ensign

Equipment maker eyes growth through custom problem solving

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HOLLAND — Manufacturers have to find ways to add value to the products they make for customers. For most companies, including bulk material handling systems producer **Ensign Equipment Inc.**, adding value means problem solving.

Owner Dave Pulver started Ensign 20 years ago after working at other companies in similar markets and realizing they weren't servicing certain markets very well. He saw the opportunity and a niche in offering customized material handling solutions along with standardized products.

"Customers don't have to take an off-the-shelf piece and make it work. We can provide the right finish piece," Pulver told *MiBiz*. "Most are often a variant of an existing product because we have a lot of adaptability (and can accommodate) a lot of customization of our standard products."

Ensign works mostly with dry bulk handling equipment, selling pieces throughout North America, but mostly in the Midwest and East Coast. In the early days of the company, it worked mainly with automotive parts plants, especially plastic injection molders. Ensign's signature products helped move bulk plastic from gaylords to the injection molding presses.

As those companies moved production from the U.S., Ensign Equipment



Ensign Equipment's VP Wayne Linderman, left, and owner Dave Pulver, right, are hoping to bring the materials handling company into new markets as well as provide more solutions for existing clients. PHOTO: JOE BOOMGAARD

shifted more of its focus into packaging. The company has diversified into food packaging products and is looking to get involved with the chemical, pharmaceutical, fertilizer and pet foods industries, said Wayne Linderman, VP of operations.

"We're starting to stick our nose in there and see how we can be players and grow our business," Linderman said.

Ensign Equipment was down 49 percent in 2009, but sales this year are already up 53 percent compared to last year at this time. Raw material prices for the metals used in the company's products have also stabilized from a couple of years ago.

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Linderman attributes the business' quick turnaround to how Ensign partners with key suppliers. The company employs eight people at its Holland plant, strategically choosing to keep a low headcount while focusing on engineering products and outsourcing some functions to two primary suppliers.

"What's allowed the company to make it through the last year (is that) the burden was spread across several suppliers," Linderman said. "If not, we might have taken a bigger hit. This way, we're focused on our core competency."

Linderman, who joined Ensign this year, has responsibility for the day-to-day management of the company and pursuing new opportunities and was brought on to free up Pulver to work on developing product applications. With the new structure, the company plans to step up growth projections through aggressive marketing and entry into new markets, as well as bringing new products to its existing base.

Most of its current material handling pieces are focused in the front-end of customers' processes. As Ensign looks to diversify further, Linderman said it will concentrate on getting its products down the line in those processes.

"We want to be more of a one-stop shop, more a part of the entire process," Linderman said. "This company is very unique in that we have a loyalty, a following different than most in the industry. In automotive, it's all about price, price, price, but here, our relationships with our customers is very strong. They know Ensign will take care of their needs.



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At the same time, our value proposition is quality, durable equipment at good prices."

The company wants to offer more systems integration and automation solutions for its customers, he said. The team is currently looking at external bulk material silos, as an example. Another focus is on energy and process efficiency, as well as line optimization.

A key facet in growing the business, Linderman and Pulver said, will be a renewed focus on marketing and getting in front of customers. Whereas manufacturers could catch "overflow" business in the past, today, they're being forced to be more proactive in pursuing new opportunities and coming up with more customized solutions, they said.

"This economy over the last two years has changed the ground rules," Pulver said.

The differentiator for Ensign, he said,



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Holland-based manufacturer Ensign Equipment Inc. makes a line of bulk material handling systems used in a variety of industries ranging from plastic injection molding to food packaging. Products include dumpers, tilt tables, vertical auger mixers, screw conveyors, power hoppers, live bottom power hoppers, live bottom storage units, super sack unloaders, porta-stor bins and stationary storage bins. The company designs and engineers the product solution in-house, including customized pieces, relying on key suppliers for sheet metal and other parts.

is the company's delivery on customer expectations and its ability to quickly get products out. **MiBiz**