

MAY/JUNE 2017

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SOUTH

KWS MANUFACTURING CO. LTD.

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"We can make decisions that would go against what others normally would be doing."

CONVEYING QUALITY

KWS HAS A REPUTATION AS A TOP MANUFACTURER
IN ITS MARKET. BY ALAN DORICH



KWS SAYS ITS PRODUCTS "ARE USED IN PRETTY MUCH EVERY MAJOR INDUSTRY THAT PROCESSES A BULK MATERIAL."

After 45 years, KWS Manufacturing Co. Ltd. has a broad reach within its customer base. "That's the beautiful part of our business," President and CEO Bill Mecke declares. "The products that we sell are used in pretty much every major industry that processes a bulk material."

Based in Burleson, Texas, KWS manufactures conveying equipment for clients that include the agriculture, food, wastewater and alternative fuels markets. The company started operations in 1972, but Mecke and a partner bought it in 2003.

Prior to the acquisition, Mecke

worked for a competing conveyor manufacturer and earned his degree as a mechanical engineer. "My previous background was in engineering and what we would call engineered sales, which was larger, more complex project work," he says. He has applied this experience to KWS.

Today, the company's products include screw and belt conveyors, bucket elevators, screw feeders and live bottoms. Recently, KWS reengineered some of its older products for its clients, including its thermal processors.

"We've done the same thing with bucket elevators and drag conveyors,"

Mecke says. "We made them more cost effective so we can lower our selling price and provide more value for our customers."

KWS operates from a 125,000-square-foot location in Burleson and has several stocking locations across the country. "We're in the process of [adding] a stocking location in the southern California area," he says.

THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Mecke has guided KWS during difficult economic times, including the great recession of 2008 and 2009. »



» “That drove the industrial economy down in the United States,” he recalls, adding that the company’s management structure allowed it to cope.

“That’s one of the beauties of being a privately held company,” Mecke says. “We can make decisions that would go against what others normally would be doing. We don’t have a board of directors telling us, ‘You have to cut 25 percent of our workforce.’”

But as many competitors trimmed their workforces, KWS hired more people. “We also wanted to shorten our delivery times,” he recalls, ex-

plaining that the company invested in continuous improvement initiatives and new equipment.

This included implementing lean manufacturing techniques that took out as much labor as possible and shortened lead times. “We thrived in the recession,” he says, noting that KWS took the same approach as the industrial economy underwent a downturn in the last two years.

“We spent quite a bit on improvements and new machines because we know the industrial economy is going to come back,” Mecke says, not-

ing that this has enabled KWS to gain market share. “We could deliver and our competitors couldn’t deliver.”

ADDING QUALITY

When KWS adds new equipment to its operation, it determines where it has the greatest needs and documents them in its ISO program.

“That’s what a quality program does,” Mecke says. “It helps you identify your weak links.”

One recent example, he notes, was when KWS found areas of the plant that were the cause of late deliveries. “It was affecting shipments to our customers,” he recalls, adding that KWS started a continuous improvement project to evaluate the situation.

Once the company discovered it was a production-related issue, it established the goal of doubling its production with new equipment that it built on its own. “A lot of times, we build our own machines to make our own products,” Mecke says.

KWS sought to boost its production and efficiency by adding two high-definition plasma-burn tables for cutting parts. With the equipment, “You can take a plate and burn out different designs,” he says, noting that the upgrade should carry KWS for the next six years.

STRONG STANDARDS

KWS’ focus on quality has earned it ISO 9001:2015 certification. “We’re the only conveyor manufacturer of our type that’s certified to that standard,” Mecke says. “It’s a very rigid quality standard.”

The company maintains high quality by following the ISO processes and completing thorough in-process inspections and final inspections at the time of shipment or completion of the product. This level of focus helps keep

KWS' customers loyal, even when its prices are sometimes higher than its competitors.

"We're not known to be to be the low price guy in our marketplace," he admits. "We're known to be the best quality manufacturer in our market."

RUNNING LEAN

KWS continues to apply lean manufacturing practices to its work. This includes the reduction of queue times in its manufacturing and engineering processes, Mecke says.

"Typically, in a normal process, the job may be sitting more than it gets worked on," he admits. "So you want to eliminate those queue times and any unwanted or unneeded step in the process."

KWS also has arranged its machines so that its products move from one machine to another. "It doesn't go back and forth," Mecke says.

The company also has focused on the labor side by reducing the amount of handling on its floor. "If someone has to pick an item out of a basket five times, you're wasting time by putting it in the basket five times," he says.

Lean also helps the company maintain low inventory. "We're able to cut delivery times more than half so we don't [have] a lot of finished goods on hand," Mecke says. "We keep raw materials on hand, but not finished goods."

KWS also primarily builds products to order, he notes. "In a sense, we have an infinite amount of inventory because we can continue to build it to sell it again in a short period of time," Mecke says.

STRONG SUPPLIERS

KWS has strong partnerships with its suppliers, Mecke says. "We're not here to beat them up on price every day," he says, noting that they often respond quickly when the company calls.

These include Motion Industries Inc., a provider of industrial parts. "We've basically increased our purchases from them by a factor of 10 over the last three years," he says. "We've eliminated some of the other suppliers because Motion has done such a good job."

KWS PRIDE

Mecke is proud of KWS' staff. "We have a good, related group of people, whether it's in sales, engineering or manufacturing," he says, noting that some employees have been with KWS for more than 40 years.

"I know everybody in the whole company so there's a personal relationship with everybody," he says, noting

RIDING THE UPSWING

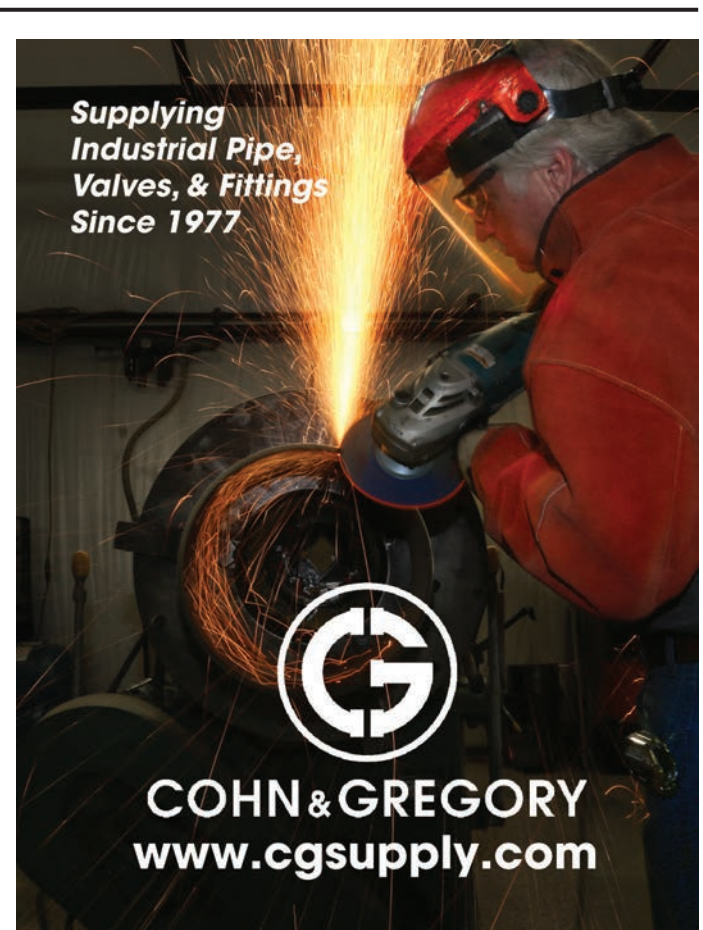
KWS Manufacturing Co. serves the housing industry, which is again starting to pick up, President and CEO Bill Mecke says. Thanks to this increase, there is an increased need for raw materials for cement, which is good news for KWS.

"Those are all conveyed with our equipment," Mecke says. "The wood products also are conveyed with all our different types of conveyors, even the bulk materials that go into making roofing shingles."

that KWS wants to help its team succeed both in and outside of work. "We want them to live happy, fulfilled lives and take care of their families."

KWS has "grand plans" to keep growing, Mecke says. "There's still a fair amount of market share that we can gain," he says.

"We're going to do it with the plan we have in place, which is providing the highest quality product with the best service and delivery," he says. "The pricing becomes secondary if you take care of those three." **mt**



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