

Staying ahead of the curve

Metal plating company finds a winning philosophy and sticks with it

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When the federal government wanted to protect the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights from deterioration, it turned to Dayton-based Techmetals Inc. for help.

The metal plating company had developed a new nickel-plating process that is impervious to gases, which was just what the National Institute of Standards and Technology needed to preserve the historical documents.

Dan Brockman, Techmetals president and chief executive officer, said his company was able to apply the coating to the frames of the specialized cases holding the aged parchments in the National Archives. And since that time about four years ago, Brockman has used the same proprietary process for other customers.

By developing such unique processes, Techmetals has been able to grow in an industry that has seen many other firms fall by the wayside.

The company -- which struggled during the economic downturn of the mid- to late 1990s -- has grown to more than \$10 million in annual revenue and is planning a \$3.3 million expansion. The expansion entails adding at least 20,000 square feet of space and about 25 jobs to the 120 already there. Techmetals recently purchased three adjacent acres from Hughes Supply Co.

Since founding the company in the mid-1970s, Brockman said the philosophy at the core of his business has remained the same: Stay one step ahead of the competition by developing new techniques and processes and offering customers something no one else could.

"If you don't have something different for your customers they have no reason to come to you," he said while walking through one of the six buildings that make up Techmetals' campus at the intersection of Springfield and Findlay streets. "There may not be a coating that exists, but if you come to us with a problem, we'll create a coating for you."

That may sound like a sales pitch, but Brockman said it is integral to his company's success. He has several employees dedicated to research, and they always look for new ideas from anyone in the company.

The company has developed several patented processes, including Ultrakoat, an electroless nickel alloy co-depositing process, and Optakoat, an electrolytic nickel plating process. Both of those products are proprietary and have not been duplicated elsewhere, he said. Techmetals also was the first company to do electroless nickel plating 20 years ago and the first to develop a process that combines the traditional technique with other materials to create stronger surfaces.

"Keeping with our tradition, our electroless process has evolved into four or five different processes," Brockman said.

For example, the company refined one of its processes to help protect a piece of equipment at a hydroelectric plant in Katmandu, Nepal. It was then able to coat the 6,000-pound, 6-foot grinder with 250,000 carats worth of crushed diamonds held together by a matrix of nickel, to better protect the piece from corrosion.

Another example is Techmetals' Optakoat product, which the company developed for a customer to coat the mold it was using to create lenses for corneal transplants. Brockman said the material is optically perfect, adding that company officials are trying to land new business using that technique.

David Barrack, executive director of Orlando, Fla.-based National Association of Metal Finishers, said the industry has been hit hard in the past several years by companies sending work overseas for lower prices and heavy government regulations.

And other industries, such as auto manufacturers -- one of the industry's traditionally larger customers -- have felt the same economic pinch. That means less work for the metal finishers.

"There are a lot of things outside the plant itself that are impacting them that is out of their control," Barrack said.

Coming up with new processes and diversifying your customer base -- as Techmetals has done -- is key to thriving in that tough environment, Barrack said.

Brockman said another factor that helps set Techmetals apart from its national competitors is the size projects it can handle. The Springfield Street location has coated parts large enough to walk through, such as a ball valve for the Alaskan oil pipeline, and smaller pieces, such as carburetor injectors.

Brockman said outpacing the competition is important as the available work becomes more scarce. Most of Techmetals' workload, at least 70 percent, comes from national customers, he said.

Currently, only less than 3 percent of the company's sales come from international work. Brockman said with a strong focus on international customers, he expects that figure to rapidly grow.

"Second prize was never enough," Brockman said.