

SHARING THEIR STORIES

Members Build, Adapt and Innovate

Everyone has a story to tell.

Whether it is a fascinating business history, or a unique product or service, Indiana Chamber member companies are no different. These organizations are innovating in a variety of fields – and they come from diverse backgrounds.

In Whitley County, here are just a few of those stories to share.

By Charlee Beasor

Red Star Contract Manufacturing

Scott Werstler didn't anticipate becoming an entrepreneur. But the Whitley County native has plenty of experience in his field: he's been building injection molding machines since he was 18.

"I never really thought I would own my own company. It wasn't a dream of mine," he admits.

Werstler's company, Red Star Contract Manufacturing, has two divisions: one (the part he originally created) does contract manufacturing, mainly for medical device manufacturers, but also for a variety of uses.

The other portion of the business (previously known as Pyramid Plastics Group) does original manufacturing of injection molding machines. Employees actually construct the machines that are used within the company's contract manufacturing division.

Werstler began working for Pyramid Plastics Group in 1998, before taking over operations in 2001 and eventually purchasing the company in 2010. A time of necessity spurred the creation of Red Star Contract Manufacturing.

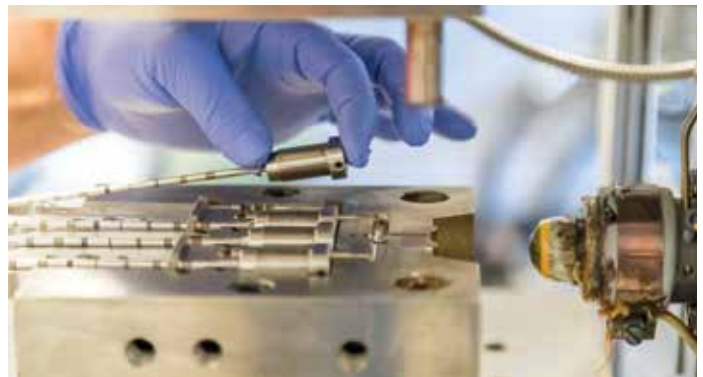
"It was all driven off the economy; in '08 and '09, nobody was buying machines. We were going after the medical (device portion) and needed to reach ISO certification and it's easier to start a new company (to achieve the certification)," he offers.

It's safe to say the approach is working: Werstler anticipates 25% growth in sales dollars in 2016, based on customer growth. Red Star Contract Manufacturing was also highlighted as an Indiana Company to Watch in 2012.

Located in Larwill, the company has nine full-time employees and several part-timers. Previously based in Noble County, Werstler moved the company to its current location in 2011.

To ensure his employees stayed on board after the move, Werstler offers three 12-hour shifts at the full-time rate to cover their travel time and gas costs. A company bonus: with machines running just three days per week, they operate more efficiently and less time is wasted on warming up.

"The advantage (of those shifts) was going to reflect back on the company. We're making medical devices, and following FDA (Food and Drug Administration regulations) and ISO, we've got to have well-trained employees. We have virtually no turnover because of this whole philosophy," he asserts.



Employees at Red Star Contract Manufacturing build medical devices and other parts for a variety of uses. The company recently rebranded and is working to increase its visibility in Indiana and in the medical device market in nearby Warsaw.



RESOURCE: Scott Werstler, Red Star Contract Manufacturing, at www.redstarcontractmfg.com

Sound Ideas

The evolution of a business can lead to a company celebrating its 20th anniversary, despite the original product not even being a facet today.

That's the story of Sound Ideas, a creative agency located in Columbia City, which offers a suite of marketing services, including branding, video production, meeting planning and creative illustration.

In 1996, owner David Hazen started out on a vastly different path: recording training onto CDs for medical sales professionals while they were in their vehicles out on the road.

"I'd love to say that was a unique idea. It really wasn't," he admits.

To sell his product, Hazen tells of visiting the library on his lunch breaks and

copying a medical device register (since he couldn't afford the \$500 cost of the book at the time), which had the phone numbers of key personnel at medical device companies around the country.

"I honestly can't remember the last time we did an audio program," he says with a laugh.

"I joke about how you used to have to reinvent every three years. Now, it's every 90 days. Every industry has its day with disruption. The medical world, in which a good portion of (the company's) time is in, has been going through that for the last three or four years."

Hazen employs eight people (though he's had as many as 15 employees). Technology clearly has had a major impact on

the company's offerings. At the heart of the business is a simple desire to respond to a client's needs.

"The mentality of being able to creatively gather information and figure out how it needs to be creatively communicated – but we just have to change with the conduit and with the need," he states.

One of Hazen's strategies to assist clients in getting the best results is what he calls "deep-dive sessions."

"One of the greatest joys I get these days is having clients come over and let their hair down and get away from their environment and chill and be creative with us. And unpack what they need to unpack and solve problems creatively," he stresses.



David Hazen created Sound Ideas 20 years ago with an idea to record training onto CDs for medical sales professionals. Today, the company specializes in marketing and branding, video production, creative illustration and more.

RESOURCE: David Hazen, Sound Ideas, at www.getsoundideas.com

Starlight Instruments

Indiana does not necessarily have the optimal environment for star-gazing. There's just too much light pollution here. But go south or west, or out to the coasts, and there are dark skies for miles.

While Columbia City-based Starlight Instruments doesn't distribute many of its products to Hoosier customers, it sells its telescope focusers nationally and worldwide.

Wayne Schroeder, operations manager, explains that the company designs, engineers and manufactures the focuser, which is the driving mechanism of the telescope.

"For example, microscopes, when you turn the knobs on the microscope, that's what we do for telescopes," he notes. "With our focuser, you can attach multiple different types of accessories, including cameras, to it and use it for astro-imaging. You can see planets, or the sun or nebulas, or most anything in the sky."

Company founder Detlef Werner Schmidt developed the Feathertouch Focuser in his home in Illinois. Current owner Jon Joseph previously machined the parts for Schmidt.

"When Werner decided to sell the company, Jon purchased it, as he knew Werner's extremely high quality standards, which is why our focusers have such tight tolerances," Schroeder offers.

The company's products, for instance, can even be found on the International Space Station.

"We sell focusers and accessories to distributors, dealers, telescope manufacturers, colleges and universities, as well as to individuals. We, as well as our dealers, sell our products to all branches of the military for their testing," Schroeder explains.

Ensuring happy clients by producing quality products is essential to employees at Starlight Instruments.

"There was a guy (recently) from California that just got a part and he talked about how well we packaged the items. It's a wow factor – you don't want to open something up and hear rattling as something was damaged in shipping. All of the employees at Starlight Instruments take great pride in their jobs and tasks," he says.

RESOURCE: Wayne Schroeder, Starlight Instruments, at www.starlightinstruments.com

Whitley Manufacturing Co., Inc.

When soldiers were returning home after World War II, some were moving into homes built by the newly-formed Whitley Manufacturing Co., in South Whitley.

The company (still in South Whitley, but with additional locations in Rochester, Indiana; Marysville, Washington; and Leola, Pennsylvania) evolved over the years to focus on office buildings.

Whitley Manufacturing still does work for the military and government. But it is also involved in commercial modular buildings for industries such as education, health care, industrial, and multi-family homes and dormitories, according to vice president and general counsel Drew Welborn.

If you've seen "oversize load" trucks barreling down the highway towing modular buildings on wheels, you might have seen a Whitley Manufacturing product.

President and CEO Simon Dragan purchased the company in the early 1990s and has expanded its footprint across the country and the world. Whitley Manufacturing has about 80 employees in Whitley County and about 250 nationwide.

"I think the big, pivotal moment was when (Dragan) took over," Welborn notes. "He's very entrepreneurial and willing to try new ideas, and I think that's really helped the company grow. We have four facilities, but in the last year we bought a company out of New York called Capsys, which does high-rise residential apartments, high-rise apartments."

The acquisition will allow the company to move into a new avenue of construction and attempt to stay at the forefront of a highly

competitive market.

Dragan, via email, describes the philosophy on keeping up with a changing industry.

"Even before we started the company, the market (modular construction) has been evolving and expanding. For us, it's a matter of how we face these challenges that make all the difference. We try to take a proactive approach; have the right people in the right positions who continually develop new and innovative products for the customer," he says.

"That's the best way to take advantage of emerging opportunities. And it's the only way to be a leader in this industry."



Whitley Manufacturing Co., Inc. began with a humble mission – to build modular homes for soldiers returning from World War II. It now constructs everything from commercial modular buildings to multi-family homes and dormitories.

RESOURCE: Simon Dragan and Drew Welborn, Whitley Manufacturing Co. Inc., at www.whitleyman.com



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