



Terri and Doug Sparks started Flex Craft about two years ago in Wabasha and now the company is showing strong growth.

Flex Craft seeing dramatic growth

5/4/2008 10:05:02

By Jeff Kiger

Post-Bulletin, Rochester MN

"Just like an Erector set."

That's how Doug Sparks describes the products sold by his Flex Craft company as he sits surrounded by racks of colorful metal pieces in the Wabasha Industrial Park.

The "erector set" is rapidly building growth for the young company.

In April, the company topped all of its combined sales since the business launched less than two years earlier. Sparks expects Flex Craft to be a \$4 million company by the end of the year.

At center of this dramatic growth are parts that can be used and reused to create carts, work stations, desks and storage racks for manufacturing plants.

"It is not rocket science," Sparks says. But Flex Craft does offer businesses, like Hearth and Home Technology and McNeilus Trucks, a simple way to improve efficiency,

As a practitioner and consultant of the theory of Lean Manufacturing, Sparks is all about flexibility and reusing materials. The key is to improve efficiency and eliminate waste.

"Common sense" is how Sparks explains the Lean concept. While working with area manufacturers, he encouraged companies to "empower" employees to try out ways to improve their work areas.

The downside was most of the time employees did not have the time or technical skills to create what they needed.

"It is a Catch 22," he said. "They were frustrated."

Flex Craft is Sparks' attempt to solve that.

"If an employee has an idea, just send them over to the shop and let them try it out. Anyone could do it with one tool. And you do not have to be super handy," he says.

The products allow companies to adjust workstations for specific projects or contract and then disassemble them to be reused in a different configuration for the next contract.

"My Dad always had me pull nails out of two-by-fours so I could re-use them. This is like that," Sparks says.

Whatever the attraction, the Flex Craft seems to have hit on a need; from January to October in 2007, the company grew 27 percent each month.

Then things became challenging, when a fire destroyed its manufacturer's plant and products. Flex Craft was completely out of business until a new manufacturer was lined up in January.

After that, business picked right up where it left off.

"We're growing at such a rate we'll soon need a larger facility," Sparks says.

He expects this summer Flex Craft will need to double its size from 2,500 square feet to 5,000 square feet. And by the end of the year, the need is estimated to rise to 10,000 square feet.

What does that mean for staffing of the five-employee company? That number will grow eventually, though the continuous improvement theories Sparks teaches to other companies has allowed the Flex Craft to absorb the growth without more workers.

"One of the fantastic challenges of this journey has been to grow in phenomenal bounds in a time when they say the economy is down," he says.