



Metal Finishing News

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Growing In A Global Economy

Jerry Conover, manager of automated blast systems at Empire Abrasive Equipment Company, updates his firm's growing success in emerging markets.

(?) MFN: For readers who might have missed our 2005 interview with Empire, could you sketch the company profile?

(!) J. C.: With pleasure. Empire is a U.S.-based company that got its start producing portable air-blast machines for the military in the early 1940s. This first step was followed by the development of out-door equipment for maintenance work and the establishment of a stocking distributor network. Our distributors, now numbering over 300, played an important role in Empire's development by helping us monitor the needs of the marketplace. When blasting operations began to move indoors during the 1960s, for example, we had a heads-up from our distributors resulting in an industrial cabinet line that now sets a world standard for durability and versatility. We also produce a full range of blast rooms and automated blast systems in addition to centrifugal-disc finishing equipment.

(?) MFN: Empire has been producing air-blast equipment for more than 60 years. How do you continue to prosper with a mature technology?

(!) J. C.: Empire's biggest asset is our commitment to the evaluation of each project that is brought to us. Especially with our engineered systems, we are always requesting additional information to enable us to recommend the most appropriate machine for each application. The information ranges from the main purpose of the machine (e.g., preparing for painting, removing a coating or peening to a specification with an arc-height requirement) to production rates, available floor space and utilities. At the same time, we stick to business basics, pursue new opportunities worldwide and respond to niche needs in the marketplace that develop because of influences such as growing environmental awareness. Health concerns, for example, have had a major impact on our industry. It's ironic that most people refer to our products as "sandblasters" while our sales literature and operating instructions warn users against using silica sand in Empire air-blast equipment. Most of your readers probably know that blasting with sand has been linked to silicosis, a chronic lung disease. As a result, the practice is now verboten in many countries and some of our customers have had to switch to other types of media that are almost universally more expensive than sand. We've responded with equipment designed to make this transition as painless as possible. In fact, our solutions—which include rooms, oversized cabinets and blast-recovery systems—often reduce costs. When users upgrade to more durable media, which these systems recycle, they save money on media replacement, cleanup and disposal. Rather than being a burden, media recycling frequently boosts profits.

(?) MFN: You mentioned worldwide opportunities. How do you chase them down?

(!) J. C.: With more than 40 international distributors pursuing business around the globe, Empire's foreign revenues continue to increase as a percent of total sales. It's encouraging that much of this growth comes from existing customers with international operations. When these multinationals establish manufacturing operations and/or agreements outside of the United States, they want reliable, efficient equipment. That's why they rely on us. Recently, we shipped a shot-peening system to Pakistan for landing-gear production and another to Singapore for peening turbine blades. The purchases, to a large degree, were based on the past performance of our company and equipment. Along the same lines, we are building two machines for Saudi Arabia, not as replacements, but as additions to our original equipment—still running strong—built way back in 1984. Large orders are also headed to Puerto Rico, Mexico and Chile.

(?) MFN: Earlier, you said: "We stick to business basics." Can you elaborate?

(!) J.C.: Our goal is to provide the Biggest Blast for the Buck, Euro, Yen, etc. Per your earlier question: YES, air-blasting is a mature technology, but one in which Empire has accrued nearly 70 years of experience. Along the way and in response to customer needs, our cabinet line has grown to include over 100 models. They work smoothly with media ranging from bicarbonate of soda to steel shot. We can enhance them with factory options designed to expedite most blasting jobs. Likewise, our blast rooms and automated capabilities derive from monitoring the needs of



Jerry Conover, manager of automated blast systems at Empire Abrasive Equipment Company



Multi-purpose shot-peening machine boosts business for rebuilders of jet-engine parts



Heavy-duty Empire cabinet with a work enclosure exceeding 4 cubic meters provides an environmentally friendly and economically attractive approach for air-blasting parts with maximum dimensions of up to 1.8 meters.

manufacturers. In short, we know how to deliver value to people whopeen and finish parts.

(?) MFN: Could you offer details?

(!) J. C.: Certainly. In terms of customer-responsive products, consider a multi-purpose shot-peening system we developed a few years ago. If my memory serves me right, MFN gave the machine an editorial splash in the November 2002 issue. The unit enables smaller rebuilders of jet-engine parts to perform a variety of peening jobs in house so they can grow their businesses. It's one of many we've tailored to meet customer needs. Concerning internal resources, Empire continues to build on its current advantages with improvements in manufacturing, testing and communication technology.

(?) MFN: As the manager of automated blast systems for Empire, would you like to comment on your sector of the company's business?

(!) J. C.: Major multinational companies can shop for automated air-blast equipment at other stops than Empire. I am encouraged to see that Empire's technology and track record carry a lot of weight worldwide. The loyalty of our customers and the responsiveness of our internal teams give me a big advantage in global competition.

We at MFN would like to thank Mr. Jerry Conover for this interview.

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