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Minnesota Mold & Engineering Group: Strength In Numbers

Four companies unite—serving as a one-stop powerhouse for art to part and anything in-between.

By Sherry L. Baranek

The Minnesota Mold & Engineering Group (MME Group)—comprised of four companies with different specialties—offers its customers one-stop shopping through project/program management, product development, mechanical and electrical engineering, modeling and rapid prototyping (RP), stereolithography apparatus (SLA), the design and construction of plastic and metal injection molds, plastic injection molding and a host of value-added services.

By combining the strengths of MME Group's four companies, which are all based in Vadnais Heights, MI—Envision Group, Minnesota Mold & Engineering, United Development Center (UDC) and Asian Inroads—MME Group has the ability to offer its customers end-to-end manufacturing solutions. "In this day and age OEMs are looking to reduce the number of vendors they deal with



Archive Issue: April 2004
Special Focus: Machining

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and streamline their delivery to market," explains MME Group president Don Chlebeck. "Because we have a vast array of manufacturing services it has lead to many new partnerships and customers. As a result—even in tough economic times—MME Group has continued to experience consistent growth."

A Natural Evolution

MME Group started out as Minnesota Mold & Engineering back in 1974 when Chlebeck took his passion for moldmaking to a new level and started his own company in his garage in St. Paul, MN. Prior to starting his own company, Chlebeck was already working in the tooling industry. He began to notice that many customers were beginning to ask for shorter and shorter leadtimes. So in the beginning, he focused on delivering high quality, plastic injection molds with short leadtimes. Approximately twelve months later, Chlebeck moved the company to another building in Shoreview, MN. The company soon outgrew this facility and moved to its current facility in Vadnais Heights, MN in 1992.

According to Chlebeck, over the next few years Minnesota Mold & Engineering experienced tremendous growth in both size and talent, with recognition as a top-notch toolmaker. This led the company to expand its offerings to include the design and construction of metal injection molds, aluminum and magnesium injection molds. "We also started designing and constructing fixtures, trim dies, testing equipment and inspection equipment," Chlebeck notes. The shop also added a number of injection molding machines to be used for sampling and the development of

plastic injection molds—which eventually expanded to include production injection molding.

In 2003, MME Group was formed as the umbrella company for the group of companies. They include the following: Envision Group, providing product development services; Minnesota Mold & Engineering, designing and building injection molds for producing plastic and metal parts, fixtures and trim dies, and machining small quantities of customer specified parts; UDC, a production injection molder offering plastic injection molding and a complete line of secondary operations and value-added services; finally, if a customer needs to place its tooling or production in China, it is handled through Asian Inroads.

Working Together

MME Group's employees from all of its companies collaborate and work together to complete the job.

According to Chlebeck, the company considers its employees paramount to MME Group's success; thus, it promotes an ESOP (employee stock-ownership plan) culture. "We are challenge-driven and look at each project as our next big opportunity," Chlebeck emphasizes. "We look at the project through the eyes of our customers and gain a great appreciation for the job that needs to get done. This culture spills into every associate's effort, attitude and proactive performance—which delights our customers and keeps them coming back for more." The company pays for any classes an employee wants to take; and offers management training.

This team atmosphere extends to its customers, who Chlebeck refers to as partners. "Since we realize that each

and every OEM has to limit the number of vendors they can work with," he comments, "we are so proud of the companies that we call our partners. Partnering with Motorola, Medtronic and St. Jude or Boston Scientific/SciMed Systems is a pleasure. In these days of doing business, good partners are very hard to come by. We recognize that and do anything within our ability and reason to keep our partners and exceed their expectations." When MME Group sits down with one of its partners to develop a new product for delivery to market, early involvement is paramount. "It is important that we understand our customer's desired outcome, their product, objective, timeline, costs and expectations," Chlebeck emphasizes.

Once both parties are on the same page, MME Group's sales force takes the information back to MME Group and holds a Key Opportunity Meeting attended by key personnel from Envision Group, Minnesota Mold & Engineering and UDC. According to Chlebeck, the objective to this meeting is to get key people up to speed and make a decision as to whether a project is a good fit and to identify any potential problems. "It also gets a second set of eyes looking at the project," Chlebeck notes.

"We now have the opportunity to quote the product development, tooling, molding and value-added services," Chlebeck emphasizes.

"Then, this is presented to the customer as an end-to-end manufacturing solution. The great part is that the customer only needs to add one vendor and can run all billing through that single point of contact."

The actual design phase begins with Envision Group. Then, Minnesota

Mold & Engineering handles mold construction. "Because both companies work hand in hand, the learning curve is greatly reduced," Chlebeck states. The mold goes to UDC for molding and value-added services. "One of the best strategic decisions we made over the past couple of years on our customers' behalf was housing UDC in the same complex that houses Minnesota Mold & Engineering," he notes. "The tools get built to UDC machine specifications, and if updates or repairs are needed, all involved are in the same facility."

If a customer needs to go to China, MME Group is still able to deliver. "We are partnered with someone who has a number of close relationships with shops and production facilities in Asia," Chlebeck notes. "They are the overseas procurement arm of MME Group. We can navigate the best direction in Asia so our customers end up with top-shelf talent, proven factories and quality products at competitive prices."

Conquering Challenges

As it has grown, Minnesota Mold & Engineering has found that its ability to overcome difficult challenges is its forte. "With our background across many industries and competence with multiple types of products, we have established four-week leadtimes on complex tooling and fast response in a high quality molding environment," Chlebeck states. "Our staff is experienced across many fields, and technically strong from office to shipping." A mix of young and older employees work with a wide range of modern equipment—including electronic project management, the latest CAD software, high-speed machining, laser capabilities and thin wall molding.

This ability to survive and thrive has helped Minnesota Mold & Engineering contend with various hurdles over the years. Chlebeck describes the top three and explains how they were overcome.

1. Struggling with a balanced workload. "We worked directly with a software development firm to develop our own home-grown web collaboration/scheduling software. The software we developed as an internal software program is our web-based Electronic Project Manager (EPM). The beauty of EPM is—because it is a web-based software tool—it can be accessed from anywhere in the world. It was designed and written as a Web collaboration tool where all the project members can connect and collaborate on a project from around the world. We can post, review and markup drawings; post our meeting minutes; schedule key activities; set critical path items; and even post sketches, pictures, and post most types of files."

2. Losing money on certain types of molds. "We analyzed ourselves by bringing in a strategic planning consultant that could give us a fresh look from a new perspective. To date, we get our strategic planning team together on a monthly basis and work with our consultant and on-going challenges and plot out our future."

3. China competition. "After losing some work to China, we developed partnerships like the ones I mentioned above, put a person on the ground and are working toward opening our own facility in China. We are going to leverage the expertise that Asian Inroads brings to the table and continue to expand our Asian presence. We are also working

on partnerships with third-party manufacturers as another avenue to expand our presence in Asia."

Moving Forward

Chlebeck plans on improving processes and cultivating new customers while staying focused on its domestic customers. "We want to expand our capabilities in areas such as such as product development, molding and assembly to capture the areas that are not be outsourced to Asia," he comments. Additionally, plans are in the works to grow the UDC.

No matter what the future holds, MME Group strives to keep service tops on its to-do list, which Chlebeck is proud to point out. "The company's past, current and future focus is on the relationships, quality, service and the confidentiality we provide to our customers and the tremendous creative culture we provide for our valued employees."

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