

## M & M Tool and Mold: Niche Moldmaking Yields Results Two Years Running

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Finding a specialty and running with it has made M&M Tool and Mold, Inc. (Green Bay, WI)-a company with two facilities and nineteen employees specializing in accelerated leadtime and difficult-to-tool molds-thrive throughout the past nine years despite turbulent times in the

moldmaking industry. Boasting sales of \$3.4 million a year and a 99 percent on-time delivery rate while running a single shift, this plastic injection mold builder also has managed to purchase that second facility and hire more employees in the past year—accomplishments that won them their second Leadtime Leader award.

Averaging a 44 percent sales growth during the past three years, co-owners Marty Ciriacks and Mike Richard have followed a simple formula during their climb to the top: specialization, automation and customer service. A two- to seven-week leadtime on multicavity production molds coupled with a unique niche keeps M&M's customers satisfied yet hungry for more.

The company's specialty comes in the form of deeply involved design analysis from in-house designers and total toolmaker involvement from project kickoff. Their main specialty is intricate multicavity tools in abbreviated leadtimes. Focusing on these molds—in addition to smooth shop floor operations, automation and using modern equipment—has proven to be fruitful for this small shop.

## **Humble Beginnings**

Ciriacks and Richard established their shop in January of 1995 in a 750-square-foot garage with only a mill, an EDM and a grinder to their names. They had both started in the business in 1983, serving apprenticeships in the same shop before striking out on their own. It only took a month to nab their first big job—a three-mold package. Ciriacks recalls their lucky break. "The entrepreneurial customer saw himself in us, as he also started his own business many years ago," he says. "He gave us the job based on our character." Upon completion of this job, the duo was able to move into a 2,500-square-foot building and hire their very first employee. Through the years they have been able to add more employees, and M&M now occupies 11,000 square feet between two facilities.

The decision to purchase a second facility in Germantown, WI, has only raised M&M's level of stellar customer service. "It's a fully equipped facility staffed with three moldmakers and one apprentice moldmaker," Ciriacks notes. "Ironically they had the same CAD/CAM software and they were set up like us to do the same type/size work we do. This is a big asset for us—enabling us to immediately service our existing customers in that area and present us with opportunities at other companies in that area who saw proximity as an issue."

Additionally, the company added some new equipment to streamline operations in their main facility. In December of 2001, they installed an Okada high-speed graphite mill. In January 2002, a 3R robot was installed to feed the graphite mill. February 2002 saw the installation of a Mitsubishi sinker that interfaces with the robot, and in June 2002 they purchased a Mitsubishi wire EDM with auto threader for lights-out operation.

## **Dedicated Workforce**

Ciriacks and Richards have been good to their employees, and it shows in their positive attitudes and enthusiasm for the work that they do. "We have a great crew of loyal employees," Richard says. "We do some things with pay that other shops don't. We have an aggressive overtime premium schedule for hours put in at the end of jobs to secure their delivery, plus we offer a flexible schedule that gives them a lot of freedom. Since Marty and I were both out in the shop in the past, we know what it takes and we're as fair as we can be with the guys. Most of them see that and we have consistently kept them busy whereas other shops haven't been able to do so.

"We have lead man toolmakers that run jobs through the shop along with several key employees that go above and beyond the call of duty," Richard continues. "They will stop back at night to check on jobs. I really can't say enough about how great they are and how their efforts facilitate workflow. They know that today's times mean extra effort is often needed."

The recent hiring of operations manager Tim Windingstad also has helped M&M's employees maintain smooth operations. Designers and programmers work in tandem-often programming on jobs in their earliest stages of design. They cut steel before the complete design hits the floor and attempt to keep all aspects of the mold design in-house so as not to lose time outsourcing. The one exception they make is with mold bases. "We work closely with Precision Mold Base Corporation in Tempe, AZ to ship us completed mold bases in three weeks," Richards notes. "You can't beat that."

Both Ciriacks and Richard maintain that their employees are responsible for the fact that M&M's customer service is second to none. "So, we consistently deliver quality molds on time. We are able to take a project and be low maintenance to our customers. We don't call with any silly questions or unnecessary extra charges. When we quote a project, we are as accurate as we can be with regards to our customer's expectations. If the customer wants to add or remove certain components to or from the mold, we are fair and accurate with our prices.

"We maintain a good reputation and that news travels fast," Richard continues. "We have managed to establish relationships with some people in the industry and they have helped us. Just good old-fashioned sales/introductions on our end also is a big part of it. Generally if we get a potential customer to our facility and they see what we are all about, they will give us an opportunity."

## **Growth Potential**

Richard and Ciriacks see no reason to slow things down. "This year, we hope to bring in another robot to service a graphite machine and/or an EDM machine in our Green Bay facility," Ciriacks notes. "In Germantown, we need more automation, including a robot and high-speed graphite machine. After that, I think our next step will be palletizing our workpieces for those machines."

Furthermore, M&M is working hard to develop technologies and processes to provide better molds faster, which they choose to not yet reveal. "We need to continue being creative-there are opportunities out there," Richard notes. "You just have to work harder to find them." Plans are also in the works to expand the company's sales force either by adding more personnel or satellite offices.

While foreign competition has been challenging to M&M, they simply rely on their quality, service and leadtimes to counter this threat. "Overseas competition has become more of an issue in this current economy," Richard affirms. "We need to keep finding ways to do things faster and-probably more importantly-smarter."

Clearly there is no shortage of smarts with this dynamic duo. In nine short years they have managed to show remarkable growth in a down economy: sales have grown from \$300,000 that first year to more than \$3 million today-now that is truly the mark of a Leadtime Leader.

## **What a Difference a Year Makes**

In 2003 M&M Tool and Mold snagged the Leadtime Leader award in the smaller shop category for zeroing in on a niche and capitalizing on that niche with incredible leadtimes. This year, they won the award a second time in a row not only by staying focused on their specialty, but by showing an amazing amount of growth at the same time. Last year, the company boasted a five- to seven-week leadtime; now certain molds can be produced in two weeks.

In 2003, M&M had fourteen employees; this year the number stands at nineteen, and the company acquired a second facility.

M&M has established new relationships with a number of companies since it acquired its new facility last year. In addition to all of the customers this facility had been serving, M&M developed a relationship with a custom molder in southeast Wisconsin.

An operations manager was brought on board. "We like to call him a project manager also," co-owner Mike Richard says. "As we continue to grow, we saw the need for someone to stay on top of projects 100 percent of the time. As more and more business duties evolve for us as owners, that 100 percent was not always there. We put out a lot of work through for a shop our size and it is another person to help manage it. Also, the individual we brought on board gave us another dimension-he was previously a project engineer and has a vast knowledge of plastics and processing."

They recently joined the Tool, Die and Machining Association of Wisconsin and plan on becoming actively involved in industry events. We keep our ear to the ground via e-mails, etc.," Richard notes. "We make a point of going to any trade and/or machinery shows in the area. We might not be in the market for a machine, but we want to stay current with what is available."