

When You Least Expect It

Rarely am I left speechless. But on a recent trip through the Midwest visiting various facilities, I came across a metalcaster who truly gets it. A 35-employee, family-run shop that understands how to compete in the global economy as a “higher-cost” U.S. manufacturer.

This firm focuses on the customer and delivers them quality products as fast as requested or faster. This means the metalcaster relies on rapid prototyping technology whenever possible to deliver customers plastic models of parts the next day and/or tooling and castings within the week. This metalcaster knows that the main benefit it can provide its customers compared to the plant next door or one across the ocean is time. It is small enough and agile enough to squeeze the rush orders through production (without affecting the larger jobs) to deliver what is necessary to the customer.

While the concept of prototype manufacturing isn't new to metalcasters, this facility is doing it as only a portion of its sales volume. This firm doesn't call itself a prototype shop, but instead a supplier of engineered components that will produce quantities from one to several thousand. The idea is that its production work supplies a good base of revenue while the prototype work adds additional revenue while also serving as a marketing tool to help find new customers.

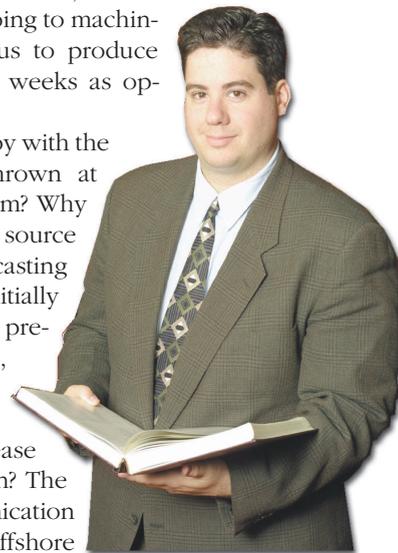
One of the largest sources of prototype work for this firm is as an intermediate supplier for customers who ultimately will be producing their cast components as die castings. This metalcaster takes the die casting design, prepares it for its manufacturing process and then pours the parts to hold over the customer until the tooling for diecasting production can be finished. While the customer pays a higher cost for the “prototype” castings, its time-to-market can be a week as opposed to 20 weeks waiting on diecasting tooling. While the metalcaster ideally doesn't like to cast a part in its process that is designed for diecasting, the ability to provide a part that is the exact same as the production part makes the customer's life easier.

What a concept! Satisfy the customer in every way possible. Beat the competition where we can

hurt it most—customer service and time-to-market.

While not all jobs require the speed to market that rapid prototyping delivers, many could use a push to deliver at least the first batch of castings within 2-3 weeks. Regardless of process or metal, there are technologies from rapid prototyping to machining of sand molds that allow us to produce castings and tooling in days or weeks as opposed to months.

Our customer base is not happy with the 10-12-week leadtimes being thrown at them, and who could blame them? Why should we push our customers to source domestically if they can't get a casting sooner than 3 months? While initially our customers must pay a hefty premium for the speed they require, why shouldn't these quick manufacturing techniques become a part of our repertoire and increase our costs by only a small margin? The time will come when communication and technology allow all the offshore sources to feel as if they truly are next door to our customers. Then what do we do?



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I have said before in this column that this is a watershed time for the North American metalcasting market. The next four years look to be very strong production years for all metals and all processes, and we must take advantage of them.

First and foremost, we must regain control of our pricing and ensure reasonable profits on the casting orders we secure. However, to do this, we also must show our customer base that we are delivering them more than a hunk of metal. This comes down to assisting them with up-front engineering and then delivering product quickly. This is our only ace in the hole.

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