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Small company makes Big Equipment



Advocate staff photo by PATRICK DENNIS -- Robert Rogillio monitors the work done at a computerized burning table, which cuts sheets of steel into designated shapes at the Anvil Attachments plant in Slaughter.

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THE ADVOCATE

Anvil Attachments produces grapples, buckets for sale, rent

BY TED GRIGGS

0 COMMENTS

Advocate business writer
 April 27, 2013

When Chevron, Citgo, ExxonMobil, Marathon or other refiners need a giant “bucket” to move thousands of pounds of petroleum coke, they don’t call Houston or Los Angeles or Chicago.

The refiners make a call to Anvil Attachments in Slaughter. A small company in a small town, Anvil makes very large pieces of equipment — the buckets, grapples and grabs used in more than a dozen industries ranging from coal and coke to waste and wood products. Anvil’s products have been used to help remove the World Trade Center debris from 9/11 and to build the man-made islands of Dubai.

“In the U.S. we’re probably the biggest and most diversified as far as different products, as far as buckets,” President John Craft said.

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The company expects to grow by at least 50 percent over the next five years, Craft said.

“I don’t want to grow too fast. I’ve seen too many other people do that and it hurts them,” Craft said.

The size of the attachment market is unclear.

Bob Bedard, president of the National Association Supply Co-Operative Inc., the purchasing co-op for the recycling industry, said U.S. scrap yards probably spend “tens of millions” of dollars on grapples each year.

Anvil has been supplying bulk-material handling equipment since 1905 under the brands Hawco, Pro-Line, Anvil, Owen, Yaun, Williams and Drott.

Owner Edward Diefenthal bought the company, then called Hawco, from Henry Watson in the early 1990s. The company employs around 80 people.

Anvil’s buckets and grapples cost from about \$20,000 to upwards of \$250,000 for the largest devices. The biggest thing Anvil made was a 77-cubic-yard bucket for wood chips; the heaviest, a 96,000-pound dredging bucket that had to be shipped on three flatbed trucks.

Anvil also rebuilds equipment, its own and competitors’, and the company established a rental fleet in 2009 that has become a major source of revenue.

Craft said a big chunk of Anvil’s new business could come from foreign markets.

The company plans to add sales representatives in the United Kingdom and Europe, Craft said. Anvil has a South America sales rep, who has helped, Craft said. But making a mark in Europe will take a while, with a customer or two willing to take a risk on a relative newcomer.

The European business will take off once that happens, Craft said.

The company has already gained a measure of notoriety overseas. Last year, the company won International Bulk Journal’s award for “Best Grab.” The shortlist of competitors included companies from Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Turkey.

In November, Craft attended the awards ceremony in Hamburg but never expected to win.

“I was kind of stunned,” Craft said. “I was glad I didn’t have to speak because I didn’t have nothing prepared.”

Still, it was cool beating all those Europeans on their own turf, Craft said. Anvil’s competitors were bewildered.

The International Business Journal is the trade magazine of the maritime dry bulk industry. The magazine’s award is just one Anvil has collected recently. Anvil also won the Manufacturing Extension Partnership of Louisiana’s 2012 Small Manufacturers Award. In 2011, Anvil won a U.S. Commerce Department Export Achievement Award.

Meanwhile, Craft said the company has already taken several steps to prepare for its growth.

The company has invested \$1.25 million in equipment and improvements in the last couple of years, including \$700,000 on a burning machine. The machine has a 60-foot cutting bed, can slice through 8 inches of steel plate and bevel the edges of the metal.

Before the new machine was installed, a worker had to hand-bevel the parts — grinding them and cleaning them to prepare them for welding,

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Craft said. The entire process took one worker around 3½ hours; the machine can do it in 16 minutes.

Craft also instituted a “lean manufacturing” program, an approach designed to make sure all resources are used to create value for the customer.

One of those steps includes designing new buckets around standardized parts and keeping those parts in stock, said Lean facilitator Jay Landaiche.

Most of the parts have to be machined and sent off to be heat-treated, then machined again, Landaiche said. Having the parts ready ahead of time cuts two weeks off of fabrication time.

Craft said he has no idea how much time and effort Anvil has put into the Lean program.

Tracking the hours and costs goes against Lean principles because that knowledge doesn't add any value for the customer, he said.

“You think we're out here in Slaughter,” marketing director Shane Toncrey said, pausing. “But we're really innovative in what we're doing.”

One of those innovations involves a software program called Finite Element Analysis.

Anvil runs all of its designs through the program, which simulates the internal and external forces on each part of a bucket or grapple, said designer Nicholas Seghers. Basically, the software allows the company to error-proof the devices before they reach the field.

Seghers said Anvil uses the information the program generates to make the products better and stronger, and to do that intelligently.

Rather than just throwing a bigger block of steel at a weak point, Anvil might change the design's geometry, he said.

Toncrey said another important innovation is Anvil's patented “cluster sheave,” which can double or triple the life of a crane's cable by reducing wear at the connection to a bucket or grapple.

The cable is what wears out first, and a company can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on crane cables, he said. Anvil's cluster sheave is saving Chevron more than \$125,000 a year on cable, he said.

Anvil sales director Kyle Watson said the costs add up quickly when a company has to change the cable on a crane.

“When you're unloading a ship, time is everything,” Watson said.

Anvil's customers sign a contract guaranteeing they'll unload a ship or a barge in a certain amount of time, Watson said. There are financial penalties if that doesn't happen.

Delays could cost Anvil's customers' clients money, Watson said. Additional time at the dock means more port fees, and those can run thousands of dollars per day.

This approach — always thinking about saving customers' money — helped lead Anvil to create a rental fleet. Much of the rental inventory lines Anvil's grounds in Slaughter.

Around 2009 in the midst of the recession, Anvil started getting calls because a lot of customers couldn't afford to buy new units.

So Anvil decided to give rentals a try, Craft said. The new segment of business has been a success.

Rentals work well for companies whose business is intermittent, Craft

said. Those customers don't have to invest in a new bucket or grapppler. Anvil also offers a lease-to-own service so part of customers' rent goes toward purchasing the devices.

Watson said there is another reason for the rental business's success: Anvil is one of the few attachment manufacturers with a rental program, an advantage when something breaks.

"There are lots equipment places where you can rent units, but they can't service them like we can because we built it and know exactly what's in there for parts," Watson said.

If a rental from an equipment dealer breaks, the customer has to call the dealer. The dealer has to call the manufacturer, Watson said. Anvil's rentals cut out the middleman, which reduces the delays and saves the customer money, he said.

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