

From Garage Beginnings to New Expansion:

R. C. Pfaff Company finds move to automation is key to growth.

By Debora Babin Katz

When customers at Emerald Tool where Russell Pfaff worked continued to ask him why he didn't start his own business, he began to ask himself the same question. He certainly had enough sharpening experience. He had started his career in 1978 as a Junior in high school working at Emerald Carbide, located in Eugene, Oregon. Four years later, he became part owner of that company. When the ownership broke up in 1982, Russell moved on to the Seattle area where he started as a training supervisor at Emerald Tool and worked his way up to a manager position.

"When your customers are telling you, 'why don't you do your own thing' you begin to realize what you can do," said Pfaff. He aspired to owning his own company, one that would focus on offering great customer service and better quality sharpening. In 1994, Pfaff started R.C. Pfaff Company from his garage with the purchase of some older, used machinery. "That same week an old customer, Brightwood, immediately sent over a huge order to me." Others would follow and, six months later Pfaff moved out of his garage and into a 1,500 sq. foot facility where he ran the company for the next three years.

"I knew that for my business to grow, I would



Russell Pfaff (shown far left), owner of R.C. Pfaff Company in Monroe, Washington, next to his salesperson Ron and the rest of his sharpening crew Mark, Larry, and Bob.

need to invest in automated equipment," said Pfaff. At the time, Pfaff was sending out saws that people brought to him. "I realized I needed to bring this work in-house because if something happened to the companies I was sending the work to I would lose this group of customers." In 1996, Pfaff contacted Colonial Saw Company. He already knew Harry Van Hagens and Rudy Stalder from his earlier days working at Emerald Tool. They had bought machinery from Colonial Saw. "Harry ran Colonial's West Coast facility and Rudy was the technician who came out to Emerald to set up the machine," said Pfaff. "I spent a week with Rudy, we had dinners out and by the time he left, I got to really know him and Colonial Saw Company," recalled Pfaff who continued to keep in touch with Harry and the team at Colonial Saw. "I went

to a machinery show and bought my first automatic carbide saw grinder, a (Wright Maximum) TF-850-SP from Colonial Saw," said Pfaff "I'm still today using that machine daily and doing about 15 saws a day on it, in addition to the saws we do on the FACEMAX 850 I bought this past year," noted Pfaff. Four years later, Pfaff purchased his second carbide saw grinder from Colonial Saw, an UTMA AL804.

Pfaff continues to invest in new machinery, even during tough economic times. In 2001, he brought on a Businaro Rekord Control Cold Saw Grinder, a UTMA LC25-NC3, a MVM PX 1000 Knife Grinder. "You always have to look at how much return on your investment you will get from a machine before you buy it," he said. "When I bought the UTMA LC25-NC3, I

Shop Snapshot

Company:

R.C. Pfaff Company

Location:

Monroe, Washington

Owner:

Russell Pfaff

Year of Inception:

1994

Business Mix:

Manufactures and services carbide tools from small shapers up to big window sets, inserts and HSS moulder knives. Carbide and HSS saw blades. Straight knives up to 40".

Tool Lines:

All major brands of circular saws including South East Tool, Amana etc.

Shop Size:

3,900 sq. feet

Employees: 5

Key Grinding

Equipment:

Wright MAXimum TF-850-SP, DS-1200 FACEMAX UTMA AL804 LC25-NC3 P20-CNC Rekord Control MVM PX1000 Ultrasonic Cleaning System

Favorite Pastime:

Fishing

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didn't have any work for it at the time, but I knew I would grow into it and I've picked up a lot of business because we had that machine," said Pfaff.

Pfaff says he has seen "great efficiencies to automation" in his shop. "Mark will run up to 5 machines at one time--one man can set up and run the 850, 804, LC25, the P20 and the FACEMAX--and we can tag team if it gets really busy.

Working with Colonial Saw has also helped Pfaff in his decisions regarding what machines make the most sense for his company and where he wants to grow his sharpening business. "Honesty was what I loved about Harry," said Pfaff. "He would never sell me a machine I didn't need and, sometimes he even questioned me on why I wanted to go with a certain machine that Colonial Saw carried," he added. Pfaff attributes this "trust factor" to why he continues to buy from Colonial Saw. "That and the fact that they stand

behind everything they sell, and they know what WE NEED as opposed to what they want to sell to us," said Pfaff.

Customer service in Pfaff's own company is a high priority for this owner. "It's a major focus still today," he said. "It's important to make every customer feel like they are your best customer, that they are special to you."

Pfaff attributes his outstanding customer service philosophy along with his commitment to investing in automatic equipment as the corner stones to his success. "Having automatic equipment in the shop has definitely paid off," said Pfaff. "There are great operational efficiencies to these machines."

The decision to invest in the P20CNC Profile grinder, for example, allowed the shop to substantially decrease manual labor and increase their turnaround times on custom profile knives. "On the manual machines there



R.C. Pfaff Company's profile knife manufacturing area with P20CNC shown here at far left.

was a lot of man hours that we couldn't afford in order to stay ahead. We didn't plan for carbide inserts, now we are grinding inserts on it," he said. The impact of getting out of manual labor and moving to automation has had a very positive impact for the shop. "We picked up customers we never would have gotten without that machine. The move to automation has also helped to offset the high cost of experienced employees," said Pfaff, who noted that his current staff has a combined 140 years of sharpening experience.

While the shop had the TF850 for years, the addition of the FACEMAX has allowed the shop to continue work with no down time. "And, it's nice to have a back up when other equipment is down. We love the FACEMAX, it's so nice to run," added Pfaff.

Labor efficiencies were also gained with a recent purchase of the Ultrasonic Cleaning System. "Prior to owning the Ul-

trasonic, my sales person had to clean all our tooling daily," said Pfaff, "now we've freed up a salesperson an hour a day to focus on sales, that's huge."

Ask him what piece of advice he would give to someone just starting out in the sharpening industry, and he is quick to respond: "Buy a machine you know will make you money. It's not always the most expensive machine, but you need to know what your return on investment will be and what quality you can expect from the machine." At the time he was considering the LC25, for example, he says he didn't have any work for it, "but I knew I could grow into that machine, and we ended up picking up a lot of business because we had it."



The UTMA AL804 shown here was the second carbide grinder Russell Pfaff invested in which is still in use today. Also shown at left is his FACEMAX.



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