

TURNING PRO: Professional Plating a Perennial Top Shop Winner

Wisconsin shop is an annual *Products Finishing Top Shop* winner in plating and liquid/powder coatings.

BY TIM PENNINGTON EDITOR

Walking at a brisk pace, we are about to meet “Shirley,” the \$3.6 million zinc rack plating line behemoth that Professional Plating installed in late 2018 and which shop leaders in Brillion, Wisconsin, think will carry them even further into the future.

Larry Dietz, the shop’s general manager, takes us through the maze of the 200,000-square-foot facility along with Kerry Behnke, the facility’s zinc plating guru, who works with “Shirley” on a daily basis. It’s officially called Rack 5 in the overall scheme of things at Professional Plating, but it was Behnke and her Team who christened it “Shirley” when it first came online.

“We put the new line in because we wanted to make sure we had consistency and reliability with our equipment for our growing customer base,” Dietz says. “We couldn’t afford any downtime, so we invested heavily.”

That’s when Behnke remarked to Dietz during the installation process, “Surely, this one will work whenever we need it to.” Thus, the steel, plastic and composite fixtures of the line became collectively known as “Shirley” and it hasn’t missed a beat since they flipped the switch.

But new isn’t something entirely foreign to Professional Plating. Over the last decade, the company has invested over \$12 million in new facilities and equipment, including adding 125,000 square feet of space to its expansive campus and also building new spaces for employees to work out, relax and meet when the situation calls for it.

Plating, Powdercoat and Electrocoat

Professional Plating is a triple threat when it comes to finishing. Not only is it one of the largest electroplaters in the Midwest, but it also has a large powder coating operation and electrocoat facility.

More impressive, Professional Plating has been a five-time *Products Finishing Top Shops Benchmarking Survey* award winner for both plating and powder coating, taking home the prestigious award each year that it has been offered.

The improvements have been extremely beneficial for Professional Plating’s customers. The shop reports a 99% on-time delivery rate and over 99% first-pass quality, which is especially impressive because the shop spends over 1,400 hours per week dedicated to part inspection.

“More than 35% of what we ship out of here goes to our customers’ customers, so we have to get it done right and on time every time,” Dietz says. “Without that thought process, we wouldn’t have the company we have today.”

The shop originated in 1979 as a 10,000-square-foot barrel plater to augment parent company Endries International’s fasteners business. The steady growth has mirrored the installation of the latest plating technologies, including automatic lines and equipment that helps improve safety, quality and efficiencies, and offers value-added services.

In 2009, it added 65,000 square feet to the 80,000 it already had to increase the storage area for finished product and added a fully automated, zinc barrel plating line.

In 2013, one of the rack zinc plating lines was decommissioned to make way for a new,

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custom-built plating machine to improve efficiency and design enhancements and to ensure repeatable, consistent quality. The new rack line added in 2016 gave them the ability to plate parts as long as 110 inches, up from 72 inches.

Bringing Processes In-house

Booming business challenged Professional Plating to take the unique step of hiring two outside shops to handle additional work while it planned a further facility expansion and added new equipment. The 2016 addition of a new rack line was followed in December 2018 with the latest new rack line of a similar size. Both have helped to bring that work back inside.

There's no question that the driving force behind Professional Plating's meticulous expansion and outstanding growth has been Dietz, who joined the company in 2001 with a career not in finishing, but in manufacturing, where he worked at Tecumseh Products building small engines for Ariens, John Deere, Toro and Simplicity, among others. When he joined the finishing company, Dietz vividly recalled how frustrated he would get at certain points along the supply chain process, whether it was missed deadlines or damaged or lost parts.

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"I was on the other side of the fence and I know what those hassles can be because I was on the wrong end of them many times," he says. "When I came here, I told our team that we were going to be known by our customers to be repeatable and consistent, but for all the right reasons."

These days, when Dietz and his team meet with prospective customers who are searching for a new finishing operation to partner with, he is very upfront and honest about what the working relationship will look like.

"I tell them all that we will not be the cheapest finishing operation they will find, but we will be their best value in the long run," he says. "There is an extensive value to repeatability when it comes to finishing, and we let our customers know what that value is when they work with us. It is an inherent part of what we do every day. It's in our DNA."

Growing Stable Workforce

Along with Behnke and Jessica Moskow, the powder coat manager, Dietz and his management team drive home that need for repeatability and consistency to more than 225 team members by showing them how important team members are to the company's operations.

Behnke says developing a stable and growing workforce in a high employment economy has been tough, but they have tried many different avenues to fill positions when they come open or when they need to add more staff.

"It's a tough market to hire people these days," she says. "We have taken several different approaches, including bringing in certain people with special needs who can come in and help us on jobs. We also have an extensive training program where we try to embrace the culture of the younger employees with their phones and gadgets, and we utilize a special phone app, called ProConnect. Where we can chat with them individually and post messages of support. It's like PPI's own Facebook app and the response has been very good."

In 2017, Professional Plating remodeled its facilities to add features for its team members, including a new team center, work lounge and wellness center, collaboration room and comfort suite. The new spaces allow its team members to have upgraded areas to relax before, during and after work, including a new cafeteria, kitchen, locker rooms, restrooms and a fully furnished wellness center with 20 pieces of equipment that employees are



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able to use at no charge. The collaboration room is a specialty area that allows for group problem-solving and connection, and the fully furnished comfort suite can be used by team members who might be feeling ill during their shifts or as a privacy area for nursing mothers.

"Every success we have had here has been because we have such dedicated team members," Behnke says. "Just as we buy new plating equipment and technology, we wanted to make sure our members are happy to come to work and that we take care of them. It was one of the first things we wanted to do when we started looking at remodeling."

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

More importantly, Dietz and his managers have developed a culture of encouraging philanthropic and charity work among their team members, often working hand-in-hand with them on events and pet projects they volunteer for or support.

For example, team members donated items for the Harbor House in Appleton, a safe haven for women and children who are victims of domestic violence. Because many families are forced to leave with little more than the clothes on their backs, the employees collected daily hygiene needs, diapers, formula, socks and underwear, as well as money used to buy food gift cards.

When team members learned that a niece of a powder department team member was running in a "Team in Training" event for leukemia, they raised more than \$1,300 to help her compete in the event. After a team member gave birth three months early and endured unexpected travel and medical expenses, fellow team members brought in soups and baked goods to sell to each other, raising more than \$600. Each Christmas, Professional

Plating holds an annual holiday food drive to help stock the shelves of the local food pantry. Team members collected more than 1,000 items this year and the company made a significant monetary donation for purchase of meat products.

"If a team member comes to us about something they feel strongly about, we'll support them," Dietz says. "And that means they will usually get the support of all the other team members, too. It's teamwork, but it is also about caring for each other." ■■

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See Larry Dietz, Kerry Behnke and Jessica Moskow talk about how their team has earned 5 Top Shops awards. Visit short.pfonline.com/ProPlating or snap the QR code with your phone.

