Manufacturers Leading the Way to Rebound from COVID-19

by Bob Zaruta, President/CEO, NWIRC

Throughout history, Pennsylvania manufacturers have consistently driven our nation to triumph over its adversaries. During World War I, PA firms produced more than half of the firepower supplied to the U.S. Army. When the nation entered World War II, Pennsylvania manufacturers once again answered the call by providing one-third of the country’s steel used to build tanks, battleships and other war components.

Today, Pennsylvania is the ninth (9th) largest state in terms of U.S. Department of Defense contracts with more than $13.4 billion of goods and services provided annually. Recent times have presented Pennsylvania and our nation with a new nemesis and an entirely different type of battle. The COVID-19 pandemic caught our world, our state and our communities off-guard as we confronted a threat that was unknown, invisible and deadly.

While healthcare providers and others served as front-line fighters in this unprecedented war, the critical role of Pennsylvania’s manufacturers should also be recognized. As the nation’s sixth (6th) largest state in terms of medical device employment, the nation looked to Pennsylvania’s industrial base for leadership amidst this crisis. True to form, our manufacturing community did not disappoint. Throughout the pandemic, more than 8,200 Pennsylvania manufacturers and their 370,000 employees remained operational and continued to produce goods that our domestic economy and citizens needed to remain viable. Our food, beverage, paper, plastic packaging and chemical plants kept products on store shelves while our advanced electronics, HVAC equipment, medical device, aerospace parts, machine parts and forging facilities continued to produce goods essential to our everyday lives. Many small and mid-sized manufacturers quickly transitioned to produce medical supplies and products needed for the fight against COVID-19.

Early on, distilleries across the country, including in northwestern PA, began answering the call by producing hand sanitizer. As with other manufacturing companies dealing with broken supply chains, many initially had difficulties getting supplies to produce. These companies then began providing products to the healthcare frontline and other businesses when their regular suppliers came up empty. Erie Distillery began making sanitizer at the request of the Erie County Health Department and Conneaut Cellars Winery & Distillery made product for donating to area nursing homes. Additional new manufacturers of hand sanitizer across the region include Five & 20 Spirits and Brewing, Cart/Horse Distillery, MLH Distillery, Grumpy Goat Distillery, Ramhorn Distillery, and CJ Spirits in Kane PA, and Luminary Distilling—just to name a few.

Tamarack Packaging in Crawford County jumped into action by making several hundred masks a day for the Meadville Medical Center with their commercial sewing machines. Brookville Glove in Jefferson County also pivoted to making face masks. In Venango County, Matric Group switched their 3D printers typically used for modeling and production to print face shields that are donated to first responders. Plastics manufacturers in Erie County also began producing face shields, including Port Erie Plastics and Munot Plastics.

At Phoenix Sintered in Elk County, an employee made face shields on his 3-D printer for other company employees which was noted on their social media as “the culture of developing great solutions is in the DNA of Phoenix Sintered Metals.”

Continued on Page 2
Continued from Page 1

Howard Industries designed and is manufacturing SGuards (sneeze guards) to allow companies to protect their employees and customers. Viking Plastics in Corry PA, who already had relationships with Ford, was asked by the company to produce a part for ventilators.

This is just the very tip of the iceberg of how manufacturing companies in our region have responded and are too numerous for mentioning them all. While many manufacturers modified their processes and production lines to contribute to the fight against COVID-19, others already in the medical device and equipment supply chain increased their output to meet demand.

Now, as our manufacturers transition to full operations, it is time to ensure that this sector has the resources it needs to fully recover and thrive. A strong commitment from Pennsylvania legislators will undoubtedly yield a high return. Since 1988, the Pennsylvania Industrial Resource Centers (IRCs) have served Pennsylvania’s small and mid-sized manufacturers with the services and expertise they require to meet the COVID-19 challenge. Lean manufacturing systems, ISO certifications, new product development processes, supply chain risk mitigation protocols, IT infrastructure, cybersecurity frameworks and disaster preparation & recovery plans have all been provided to manufacturers through their local IRCs.

NWIRC has helped lead the way. By remaining open as an essential business throughout the past three months, NWIRC staff worked remotely to continue conversations with manufacturers to provide resources, information, and offer free interactive webinars. Our Strategic Business Advisors provided consultative services to numerous local manufacturers, helping them find new suppliers, implement improved safety measures, locate CDC-approved protective equipment and cleansers, and integrate telework and remote technologies into their operations. And, we collaborated with regional organizations to develop the COVID-19 Recovery Program which I mentioned in last month’s article. The time to further bolster the strength, resiliency and long-term viability of our regional manufacturers is now and NWIRC is here to assist.

Side Note: Special thanks to our sister-IRC center, Northeastern PA Industrial Resource Center (NEPIRC), for creating a special message on behalf of the PA IRC Network. It’s a powerful short video titled, PA Manufacturing Rising to the Challenge. Take a moment to view and share it by searching for the video title in YouTube or use this QR Code.

How to Market to New Customers When Orders are Slow

by Mary Mechler, Technical Specialist, IMEC

We find ourselves in a most unpredictable situation today. It seems each day, another challenge is added to an already very complex business environment. Many companies are experiencing slow sales with uncertainty of the future, while others are experiencing new growth. There is a tendency to cut back on marketing activities when in tough or lean times. In fact, the opposite should be the choice. These are exactly the times when your presence can make a difference in growing customers and revenues. No matter how small the market, there still is a market.

And, in keeping with common reaction, many competitors will pull their efforts back, leaving more space for those who choose to continue marketing to stay in front of customers and prospects. A very wise customer once told me that adhering to this fundamental marketing guideline is one of the primary reasons he had been able to lead the market in sales in his company’s 50 year history.

To begin, put yourself in your customer’s shoes to formulate a plan. Following are some steps to create a short-term plan and approach:

Talk to your customers

Nothing beats speaking directly with customers, especially during uncertain times. So, invest some time into making calls and gathering information. Ask about their concerns and pains. There could be a range of issues they are confronted with, from supply chain delays, ability to produce and deliver, slow or canceled orders from customers, etc. Those same concerns and pains are likely relevant to prospective customers as well, and understanding them will serve you well in marketing to both customers and prospects.

Now that you know your customer's circumstances, how might you be able to mitigate or minimize the effect of those concerns? Now is the time for creativity in assisting to fill gaps and solve problems. Is there more work you can do internally, such as assembly?

Continued on Page 3
Continued from Page 2

Is it possible to partner with complementary service providers to give more of a total solution? What flexibilities are you able to offer? One word of caution – take care not to stray too far from your core competencies into unchartered territory when considering options.

**Make a list of the customer's needs and how you will address them**

The customer pains you understand, and solutions you can provide will become part of your marketing messaging. Write down each challenge and how you can address each. Remember that your customers and prospects want to know what is in it for them, particularly in difficult times, so avoid simply providing a list of capabilities.

There will likely be an overwhelming amount of information available at this time, so be as relevant and focused on the customer needs as possible. The goal is to solve problems.

**Get your message out**

Having identified customer pains and your solutions, begin communicating in channels available to you that will allow your message to get to customers and prospective customers as quickly as possible. Use what you have in place now. There are many options available that are low to no cost. For example, if you only have the means to make phone calls, then make phone calls. You can plan for future, more comprehensive marketing practices as the situation settles a bit.

**Update Your Website**

Do this first. Your website is the top channel for anyone seeking solutions to problems and should be included in all other forms of your messaging. Over 70% of people begin a search for, well anything, online. Amend your website copy to reflect this new information so that customers and prospects alike can clearly understand how you can support them. Keep their success and minimization of business disruption in mind, using thoughts such as, we are here for you; we understand current needs, are dependable, flexible, and this is how we can help.

Once you have the message created, it is there to be used across other channels listed below.

**Phone Calls:** If this is your only means of engaging with your customers, simply call them to share your message. Multiple people working on this as a team is helpful, if staff is available.

**Email:** People are more likely to see emails now due to social distancing, making email even more important as a tool for communicating. Do you have a customer email list? This is an opportunity to use it in helping you spread the word. Again, address the known pains and how you can support them. A tip here: less is more. Don’t write a lengthy email. No one has the time, and a lot of words on a page may be ignored. Just the facts. Remember, we’re here for you, dependable, flexible, and this is how we can help. Call us to talk about your unique situation.

**Social Media:** Platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook are a fast and free connection to your network, and an appropriate way to reach customers and prospects with a supportive message.

**After things settle, going forward:**

If you don’t currently have a communication system or marketing program in place, think about building one now. Plan as if the situation will repeat itself, and maybe to a more challenging degree. Perhaps you have some employees with a bit of time to work on the necessary tools and plans. The benefits of being able to communicate with customers and the market in a nimble fashion will serve you well in good times as well as difficult times. For when the current crisis has passed, you will have a bit of experience, and momentum. The next step is ensuring you have the communication mechanisms and plan in place to help you grow your business in the future.

**Side Note:** For additional insights on growing your business, NWIRC will offer a no-cost webinar, *Proven Ways to Generate Leads During an Economic Downturn*, on July 16 from 11:00am-12:00pm.

Find more details at www.nwirc.org/events

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**What’s So Cool About Manufacturing - Best of PA**

The WSCM student video contest ‘Best of PA’ statewide virtual awards event was held on June 9. Our region had a winning team in the top three. Congratulations to the Oil City Area Middle School for taking a 3rd Place at ‘States’. The featured manufacturer in their video is Matric Group, located in Venango County.

Matric Group President/CEO, Richard Turner, during an interview with Olivia Vorse from the OCAMS Team.
YOUR STRATEGIC BUSINESS ADVISORS

If you have questions, or would like to speak with someone from NWIRC about services, please contact your Strategic Business Advisor (SBA):

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Global Supply Chain Realignment  
July 1, Webinar

Proven Ways to Generate New Leads  
July 16, Webinar

Prospecting for New Sales  
July 22, Webinar

Uncovering the Flaws in Your Supply Chain  
July 23 & 30, Webinar
A 5-hour, no-cost workshop split among two-2 1/2 hour virtual sessions. Everyone agrees that supply chains are living things, many of which are currently on life support. Getting your supply chain to be a proactive, responsive living thing requires a multi-pronged approach to fix every aspect of your organization that contributes to and benefits from its operation. These sessions will highlight the changes that need to be made, the proven multi-faceted approaches to fixing the problem, and the organizational impacts that will result. There is no magic pill, but an organized approach that focuses on the basics will get it done.

Operational Excellence Workshop  
July 30, Erie
An 8-hour, in-person workshop to provide the necessary conditions for creating a high-performing organization and set-up ways to help get you there. Companies are encouraged to send up to four employees for the $350 registration fee.