

PMPA Technical Member Absolute Machine Tools Finds Success in its Flexible and Innovative Product Line

In 1988, best friends Steve Ortner and Hayden Wellman founded Absolute Machine Tools in Mr. Wellman's father's garage in Lorain, Ohio, with little more than a small line of machining centers to sell and support. The two friends met while attending Lorain County Community College. After college, Mr. Ortner worked for a distributor selling digital readouts, while Mr. Wellman spent his days operating a CAD terminal. The two soon grew dissatisfied with their respective careers, so Mr. Ortner reached out to contacts at the company through which he sold digital readouts, who then encouraged him and Mr. Wellman to start their own machine tool business. Thirty years later, the company is now a leading importer and distributor of CNC machine tools and consists of four fully staffed technical centers and a distribution network that spans all of the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

"We were both young and didn't have a lot to lose," says Mr. Ortner, president at Absolute Machine Tools. "They put a bug in my ear about going out on my own and said, 'We'll support you and give you a credit line and access to our products.'"

Soon, Mr. Ortner and Mr. Wellman were put in touch with a machine tool builder in Taiwan, which provided the company a line of machining centers. The two quickly had to teach themselves everything from sending documents on a thermal paper rotating drum facsimile machine, to making an international phone call. In order to grow the business from a marketing standpoint, Mr. Ortner recruited his wife, Courtney Ortner, who had left her job at a Fortune 500 company to join Absolute Machine Tools.

Around the time the company started, Mr. Ortner says only around 50 percent of shops had incorporated CNC machines. However, by the mid-1990s, Absolute Machine Tools began to hit their stride as the use of manual machines started to fade and CNC machines became more common.

Acquisitions were another key to Absolute Machine Tools' success. Through acquisitions, Absolute Machine Tools now has the versatility to import and distribute solutions and services for production machining, mold and die machining, high-speed machining, conventional turning, Swiss turning, wire EDM, die sinkers, hole poppers and deep-hole drilling and finishing.

"Acquisitions helped us, especially when it came to small precision production turning machines," Mr. Ortner says. "Getting the right people who are experts with the machines is a big part of it. Product lines can be acquired pretty easily, but acquiring the right people can make a huge difference."



As Absolute Machine Tools continues to grow, the company is actively trying to secure its future by attracting young talent. In addition to being on the advisory board for the machining program at a local trade school, Absolute Machine Tools partnered with the school to develop a two-year apprenticeship program for high school juniors and seniors. For students who complete the program, the company offers a full-time job as a service technician after graduation. As PMPA members, Absolute Machine Tools benefits from the organization's NextGen group, which hosts peer-to-peer discussions aimed to equip the next generation of industry leaders with new ideas and solutions.

"NextGen group is imperative to the survival of the precision machined products industry," says Mrs. Ortner, chief marketing officer at Absolute Machine Tools. "Getting young people together to discuss every facet of their businesses, processes and experiences was very impactful for me to watch."

As someone with more than 26 years of experience in an industry typically run by men, Mrs. Ortner says another PMPA group that is important to her is the "Woman of PMPA" group, which allows her to meet and talk with other women who work in manufacturing. Absolute Machine Tools also enjoys using PMPA's listserves to resolve technical issues and attending PMPA's technical conferences.

"It's amazing to see manufacturers talk openly with other manufacturers who may be competitors to them, but the idea is to share information to grow and strengthen the precision machined parts industry," Mrs. Ortner says. "That is a fantastic concept and one you can't imagine until you witness it yourself!"

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