

Sheldon Laboratory Systems eyes higher profile

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CRYSTAL SPRINGS — Considering that it has been around for more than a century and counts customers all over the world, Sheldon Laboratory Systems is a relatively unknown here in the Magnolia State. But the company that manufactures laboratory casework and technical equipment for the school, college, industrial and healthcare markets has put a renewed emphasis on marketing, and looks to springboard off of its well-known brand name in the industry to propel the company to the next level of success.

Sheldon actually traces its roots all the way back to the 1800s. It was founded in Muskegon, Mich., and established a solid reputation for its innovative, quality science casework (furniture and related equipment used in science laboratories). In 1977, Sheldon was purchased by Mississippi School Supply Company (MISSCO) of Jackson.

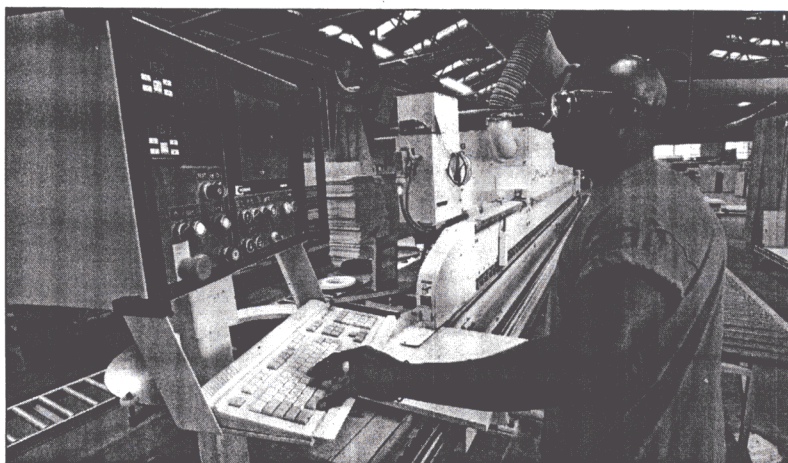
In the 1950s, a small wood-working plant opened in Crystal Springs called General Equipment Manufacturers (GEM). It, too, was eventually purchased by MISSCO, which moved Sheldon's Michigan operations to Mississippi where it was absorbed by GEM. GEM officially changed its name to Sheldon in 1998. (Today, Sheldon operates as an autonomous business unit of MISSCO, which, in turn, serves as Sheldon's distributor in the Southeast.)

The success of the company, especially in the K-12 school market, has been impressive. Its products are found in laboratories in all 50 states, and as far away as Canada, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other regions worldwide. These jobs range from single, small schools to multi-million-dollar university projects.

To achieve this success, Sheldon has used a straightforward strategy — go to the end users (teachers and school officials, architects, etc.) and find what they want and need. The company then invests significant time and money in research and development. The average product takes from 18 months to two years to go from concept to completed product, though some projects have taken up to seven years.

"We strive to listen to our customers, then develop the appropriate products," said Eddie Adkins, president of Sheldon and a native of Middleton, Tenn., just across the Mississippi line. "We value our dealers. But if we are not developing, constructing and then delivering the products that our customers need, it really doesn't matter what we do in between."

While simple, this strategy is also



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challenging. Adkins refers to school science labs as "harsh environments." Sheldon's products are expected to hold up where chemicals, fire and other potentially damaging elements are used routinely, not to mention the stresses caused by the students themselves. Thus, the company's products, which include casework, student workstations, demonstration units, fume hoods and more, must be built to not only function, but be safe and long-lasting, as well.

"Every day, you can expect some 200-pound football player to be sitting on a door or drawer," Adkins said with a smile.

Form is also key. Not only must Sheldon's products be attractive, they must meet the ever-changing needs of schools in today's budget-conscious environment, which creates a smaller and smaller footprint. Thus, the company has developed casework and other products that are versatile, offering use across multiple science disciplines, and even mobile units that can be rolled from one class-

room to the next.

If all of this wasn't enough, Sheldon, which employs approximately 100 workers who work one shift in the 200,000-square-foot plant, also is expected to ship and deliver on time, sometimes even ahead of schedule. Contractors need Sheldon's products when they need them, and Sheldon operates a temperature-controlled warehouse so that it can work ahead of the curve and ship and deliver early if that need arises. It recently reworked its labeling and handling process to insure smoother, user-friendly delivery.

More than just a manufacturer, Sheldon also offers laboratory planning. Its personnel work with schools and architects to help create safe, appropriate labs that are conducive to student learning while also taking into account teachers' time, funding issues and more.

While Sheldon may not be a household name outside the industry, within it the company has forged a reputation as being a science casework manufacturer

offering a lot of extras. Now, Sheldon is looking to get more mileage from its well-earned reputation.

Clay Thames, a Seminary native who now serves as vice president of sales and marketing at Sheldon, said the company's marketing efforts could have been stronger in recent years. The company attended a tradeshow or two, and that was pretty much it.

However, there is now a renewed emphasis on marketing. In addition to Thames, the company has beefed up its sales team with a new Southeast sales manager, marketing manager and customer service representative.

"We're making a fresh start in marketing," Thames said. "We have tremendous brand recognition, and we need to use the strength of our name. To be quite honest, we have relaxed a little bit in that area over recent years. Not any more."

The pace has only quickened at Sheldon. The company has worked 12 jobs in the metro Jackson area alone in the last 18 months. And the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in South Mississippi means more work will surely be coming its way.

"We want to be the preeminent provider of science casework in the K-12 marketplace," said Adkins, who is looking to maintain the company's 15% annual growth rate. "We want to be recognized as the best in quality, the best in service and easy to do business with. We also want to be a company people want to work for."

"I believe that we can be twice as large as we are now in five years, and four times the size we are now in 10 years."



Thames



Adkins