

# MISSISSIPPI BUSINESS JOURNAL

## Sheldon still growing after a century-plus

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**Published: September 28, 2009**

### Venerable company on record pace this year



Sheldon Laboratory Systems is currently on pace to have the greatest year in company history, an impressive accomplishment considering that it has been in continuous operation for more than 110 years.

Some of this success can be attributed to sweeping changes at Sheldon over the past half-decade — new equipment and manufacturing process and a retooling of company culture. However, the Crystal Springs-based designer and manufacturer of furniture and equipment for the educational market has implemented a number of simple, personal touches that have raised quality and cut costs.

Eddie Adkins, president of Sheldon, wraps up the company's key to success succinctly: "We build what the teacher needs with the best quality, on time and complete," he said.

That philosophy is certainly nothing new. It encapsulates the mission statement of the company that traces its roots back to 1898 and Chicago.

When E.H. Sheldon founded the company, it counted one employee and one product. Over time, the company grew, establishing a reputation for designing and manufacturing high-quality laboratory furnishings. That reputation followed it to Muskegon, Mich., where Sheldon would be headquartered through 1977.

That year, Mississippi School Supply Company bought the company and moved it to the 86,000-square-foot plant in Crystal Springs.

Adkins and Jenny Phillips, executive vice president and general manager, came on board approximately five years ago, and they immediately began implementing changes aimed at further enhancing Sheldon's reputation for delivering a quality product. This included investing in new equipment and incorporating a just-in-time manufacturing process that streamlined the workflow, improved order delivery and dramatically reduced inventory costs.

Just as important, Adkins and Phillips worked hard to instill a new culture among the employees. They looked for workers who were willing to grow with the company, and to tear down the “wall” between the front office and the manufacturing floor.

“We’re all in this together,” Phillips said. “Before, the culture was, ‘This is what I do, and I don’t want anybody else doing my job.’ Now, we’re looking for people who are interested in doing more than one job.”

This has paid tangible dividends. The 100-plus employees, working one shift, are turning more product per worker than in the past, and doing it safer. Improved morale and attractive safety incentives have cut Sheldon’s recordable injuries by some 90 percent.

Fortunately, most of Sheldon’s workers bought into the new culture. Today, the average tenure among the workers is an eye-catching 15 years

Other changes seem insignificant, but have played into Sheldon’s increased business. A good example is a low-tech product tracking system. Sheldon utilizes out-of-house installers, and in the past the company received calls too frequently from those installers complaining of incomplete shipments. The cost to replace the missing product mounted.

Sheldon struck on a low-tech solution — take photographs of every piece of an order both before and after it is loaded on the truck. That allows Sheldon to not only quickly verify whether the piece was included, but also exactly where on the truck it was placed. Annual replacement orders have fallen to near zero.

That is important, because Sheldon has little time for “do-overs.” The company counts customers in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and it has shipped orders as far as Malawi, Qatar and Italy, to name just a few.

Sheldon’s strategy is to be the best, not the least expensive, and the manufacturing process is labor-intensive, involving a significant amount of by-hand manufacturing. And, every order is custom-made. This, coupled with Sheldon’s innovative designs, continues to attract new customers.



A good example of Sheldon’s innovative designs is the flexible Axis Infinity science table. Conceived from scratch and incorporating numerous patents, the Axis Infinity accommodates laptops, desktop computers and flat-screen monitors. The motorized tabletop is adjustable, allowing students to work standing or sitting. The workstation, which includes a 19-gallon sink, encompasses a roll-away table, allowing teachers to move from one point in the classroom to the next, and the Axiom Infinity can be used for general science, biology, chemistry, physics and earth science. It is one of Sheldon’s hottest items.

While laboratory furnishings remain Sheldon’s biggest sellers, it also designs and manufactures products for art and family and consumer sciences education. Product for other courses of study is envisioned.



The company also is looking to expand its customer base. Currently, approximately 80 percent of Sheldon’s customers are elementary and secondary schools.

For more on Sheldon Laboratory Systems, visit [www.sheldonlabs.com](http://www.sheldonlabs.com).

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