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## Wisconsin Firm Uses Lean Manufacturing, Superior Customer Service as Springboard to Success

Rebecca Carnes

*Two big customers have turned to Fox Valley Spring after receiving poor quality parts from overseas.*

Having recently expanded its facility and focused its efforts on lean manufacturing, **Fox Valley Spring Co.** has weathered a lackluster economy while upholding a "whatever it takes" philosophy to deliver to customers high-quality compression, extension, and torsion springs, as well as wire forms, die springs, and flat steel.

Fox Valley, based in Greenville, Wis., was established by Russ Stang Sr. in 1989 because he saw the need for a more customer-oriented company in the spring industry. The company runs on the motto, "We're the customer service company that happens to make springs," and business has been running strong for Fox Valley, which just expanded its facility to 53,000 sq. ft. and has been honored with local and state-wide awards. The company's customer-oriented philosophy helped secure the Wisconsin MOTY Award in 2000, the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce MOTY in 2002, and the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce & Industry's 2009 Small Manufacturer of the Year award. Having recently celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> year with its 50 employees, Fox Valley Spring remains in the top 10 percent in the SMI (Spring Manufacturers Institute) Annual Market Report. The report, conducted by the Mackay research group, organizes company financial data from a large portion of SMI member companies that choose to participate in the review.

"Fox Valley Spring Company, by following the well-known, fundamental principles of lean manufacturing and continuous improvement throughout the organization, has maintained a position at the top of its peer group year after year," said Vice President of Operations Keith Wincentsen in a statement.

According to Wincentsen, the company's investment in CNC technology has allowed Fox Valley Spring to maintain or even reduce prices while the competition raises its prices to cover variable cost increases. "It's about gaining efficiencies throughout the organization and investing in better computer systems so that we can do more with the same staff that we have. Some companies reduce staffing based on lower sales. What we actually did is, through investments in technology and computer systems, we allowed our employees to do more. So we could go out and continue to push hard to bring in more business without adding those staffing levels, which has resulted in our reducing our internal costs," Wincentsen said in a phone interview.

### Lean Manufacturing is Key to Growth

Following the principles of lean manufacturing has also meant continuous improvement and increased profitability. "We are constantly evaluating our processes through management review and internal audits," Wincentsen continued. "Utilizing our review principles helps us constantly analyze what our processes are and whether they're meeting or exceeding our customers' expectations. We also get our employees involved as much as possible in the process to make sure that we're more efficient within the organization. The employees identify certain tools, equipment, and modifications to equipment that would help benefit them."

Being ISO 9001:2008 and ITAR certified, Fox Valley currently has 10 CNC coilers and four automatic spring coilers, and plans to soon add a stamping setup and a spring coiling lathe that will increase wire capacity range. Fox Valley is able to supply parts that are compliant with Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS), End-of-Life Vehicles (ELV), and Restriction of Hazardous Substances (RoHS) directives, as well as the Berry



Amendment.

"Our CNC capabilities span all standard helical springs, in addition to complex spring shapes and wire forms. Fox Valley also invests heavily in spring testing and verification equipment to ensure the job is done right the first time. Our experience with all types of springs and documentation requirements positions Fox Valley Spring Company well as the single source supplier for current and potential customers. Fox Valley utilizes only high quality material in the manufacturing process and partners with only the best finishing suppliers in the industry to consistently maintain the highest level of quality," Wincentzen said in a statement.

Fox Valley ([www.foxvalleyspring.com](http://www.foxvalleyspring.com)) continually keeps itself invested in technology in order to maintain its business growth and success. All functions within the company are equipped with new computer systems and customized software that maximizes employee efficiencies.

"Managers at Fox Valley Spring have an open door policy and encourage all employees to constructively voice their opinion. The management team at Fox Valley knows that the biggest roadblock to innovation is ego, so whenever possible we attempt to shed our titles, allowing employees to open up more than normal," Wincentzen said in a statement.

A recent expansion, located adjacent to the original facility, has added 28,000 square feet of manufacturing and office space with easy access to Highway 96. An aggressive sales strategy and company-wide efforts to make processes leaner made the expansion possible, and now the company has sufficient space to hire more employees and house equipment for an expanded product line.

"Going back to 2008, we were ready to expand but the economy didn't let us," explained Charles Klein, vice president of sales and marketing for Fox Valley Spring. "We had gotten to the point where we couldn't add any new machinery and couldn't add another person in the office—we simply ran out of space. With the new expansion, we can now go into the stamping market; we couldn't do that before because we didn't have the capacity to do it. The expansion has helped us get into some new areas to improve our business. Now we're ready to grow and we can double in size, more or less. What it's done is, with the new machinery, it makes us more cost effective. And so with some of those jobs we couldn't get in the past, now we're competitive enough to get them."

### **Speed and Quality Keep Customers Focused on Domestic Supply**

Fox Valley offers design assistance and fast turnaround that customers would not be able to get overseas, according to company managers. "One of the main things we offer here is design assistance. We like to get involved on the design floor of the product," Klein said. "We have an engineering department here that will spend hours with customers helping to design a product so that it runs the most efficiently and lasts the longest. You're not going to find too much design assistance overseas. Being able to pick up the phone and talk to an engineer, or send an e-mail and ask questions on a drawing and get a response right away, is a definite advantage."

Within the past two years, two of the company's larger customers turned to Fox Valley after encountering problems overseas. They had taken high-volume, long-running parts overseas and, within nine months, had turned to Fox Valley for help because the parts were too difficult to make by the overseas manufacturer. "They couldn't meet the quality," Wincentzen said. "And they couldn't meet the tolerances. They (customers) wound up coming back to Fox Valley Spring for those parts just because they couldn't get them sourced overseas."

"The thing is the prototype parts were great, but then when they got the production parts, they were not so great," Klein echoed.

Three to four years ago, company managers at Fox Valley Spring were hearing a lot of requests by customers asking if the company was doing business in China or partnering up with Chinese companies, but recently those off-shoring questions have dried up.

"What we're hearing now is that a lot of companies are now focusing on what they can do to transition a lot of that work back to domestic suppliers," Wincentzen said. "That's all good news for us. I think the factors are lack of quality, delivery, and customer service, and the fact that you can't have any kind of vendor-managed inventory program. You have to have another third party involved and I also think the escalating costs that they have off-shore are starting to make that gap between domestic and off-shore manufacturing a lot narrower than what it was before. And in some cases, the fully-loaded costs when you start looking at freight and warehousing can be higher than just sourcing the product domestically."

Klein added that companies aren't interested in keeping large inventories anymore and need

a quick turnaround on a part. "It seems like just about every day, somebody is looking for parts because they're not keeping inventory, and if you're dealing off-shore, that's not going to work. I think the market is driving it as well, just because of the simple fact that people aren't into large inventories anymore. They need a quick turnaround and somebody that will stock it right here."

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