

Expansion spotlights new markets for Avon firm

Star Headlight expects strong growth globally as it reaches 125th year

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

Expanding its business internationally while keeping its manufacturing operations local has helped Star Headlight & Lantern Co. Inc. to grow.

The family-owned company based in Avon, Livingston County, is in its fifth generation of leadership and celebrating its 125th year in business.

The business employs some 230 people, and its workforce has increased steadily over the past few years as it expanded its second shift and added a third. Ranked by the size of its local workforce, the company was 23rd on the most recent Rochester Business Journal list of manufacturers.

Entering new markets overseas and keeping up with technology in new products has kept the business growing steadily over the past five years, with sales rising 5 to 10 percent annually, President Christopher Jacobs said.

He has been interested in expanding into Europe for some time, calling it an untapped market for the firm.

"Customers in Europe like American-made products," he said.

Star Headlight makes safety and warning systems and lights for police and fire departments, utilities and railroads. It also makes headlights for trains, which was the main work when the firm was founded. The company also sells some lights under a private label in the industrial market.

While the firm generally sells to distributors that sell to end users, local entities that have Star Headlight equipment include the Rochester and Avon police departments and the Livingston County Sheriff's Department.

The firm's products are made in-house, from the molded parts to the circuit boards. Star Headlight does electronic and finished product assembly, along with plastic injection molding, metal fabrication, product



engineering, warehousing, shipping, customer service, sales and technical support.

Paul Mallamas, owner and president of West Virginia-based Mallimar Inc., has been doing business with Star Headlight since the early 1970s.

Mallamas said Star Headlight leaders have been aggressive and progressive in putting profits back into the business, buying new equipment purchases and investing in new technology.

The firm also is very service-oriented and open to suggestions from customers on ways to improve its products and services, he said.

"They believe in the family-owned business, in the small business, and are easy to work with," Mallamas said.

Star Headlight has fostered growth by entering the international market some two years ago. The company has two employees based in the United Kingdom who handle sales for the European market. It also has warehouse facilities there.

The company has further expanded into Canada, as well as Australia and New

Zealand, and has attended trade shows in Germany and Dubai. Domestically, Star Headlight has expanded its internal sales force from two employees to six.

The company also has expanded its site in Avon. Last fall it added nearly 4,000 square feet of space that is used to store raw materials. The business has worked to increase manufacturing efficiency.

Jacobs said international customers are most interested in the firm's light bars used for law enforcement vehicles. In the United States, demand has increased for amber warning light systems used on machinery, including telephone trucks and utility vehicles. The company has also invested in light-emitting diode technology.

Star Headlight started in downtown Rochester, and Jacobs' grandparents moved the firm to Honeoye Falls in 1952. In 1998, the company moved to its current site in Avon because of a need for more space.

Its family ownership goes back to George Jacobs, who bought the firm, formerly Star Headlight Co., from its five founders shortly after it opened in 1889. Albert, Berwin and David Jacobs followed George.

Rounding out the list is Christopher Jacobs, who was named Star Headlight's president in 2009. Jacobs, the great-great-grandson of George, also became the sole owner, purchasing Star Headlight from his father and predecessor, David Jacobs.

Jacobs said the firm's employees have been a key to its longevity. A picnic celebrating its anniversary will be held this summer.

"Our employees are a big part of our success," he said.

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