

Innovation & Commitment Keep Lincoln Plating Ahead of the Game

Polishing and buffing have always been important steps in providing a quality finishing on metal. Lincoln Plating's polishers make sure the parts are ready for the final finish.



Commitment to customer satisfaction and innovation in its approach to fulfilling that commitment have taken Lincoln Plating, Lincoln, NE, from a small jobshop to one of the highest volume finishing companies in the country. At a time when many finishers are suffering from the effects of economic recession, Lincoln Plating is realizing significant increases in volume and sales, because the company listens to its customers and gives them what they want.

Lincoln Plating Milestones

1952—Company founded by Dale & JoAnn LeBaron.
1976—New facility built.
1984—Marc LeBaron named president.
1990—Expanded to national market base.
1991—First company to receive ATT's Quality Vendor Award.
1992—Received Ford Motor Company's Qualitas Award.
1994—Construction doubles size of the facility.
1995—Lindsay Manufacturing's Supplier of the Year.
1996—First "value-added" project begins. Sales are 10 percent of total revenue.

1997—One of three companies in the nation to earn Wellness Council of America's Gold Award.
1999—Vision team sets goal to become nation's dominant finishing company.
2000—ISO 14001 certification achieved.
2001—Hank Orme named president. Marc LeBaron named chairman and CEO.
2002—80,000 ft² expansion completed.



Marc LeBaron, CEF (left), chairman and CEO, and Hank Orme, president, head the management team at Lincoln Plating.

- Anodizing (sulfuric)
- Anodizing (hard)
- Black oxide/steel (automated)
- Bright dip
- Cadmium (automated)
- Copper
- Electroless nickel
- Electropolishing
- Gold
- Hard chrome
- Sulfamate nickel/hard chrome (automated)
- Nickel
- Nickel-chrome on aluminum
- Nickel-chrome on steel (five lines; three automated)
- Silver
- Tin (automated)
- Tin-lead (automated)
- Zinc-acid chloride (two lines; one automatic barrel, one automatic rack)
- Zinc-alkaline (two lines; one automatic barrel, one automatic rack)
- Zinc-nickel (automated)

Tank size varies from 18 in. by 24 in. by 20 in. up to 32 in. by 132 in. by 72 in. The size of the parts processed also varies widely, from 1/2 in. by 1/2 in. up to nine-ft exhaust stacks used on over-the-road semi-tractors. Most of the parts processed, however, are relatively small. Lincoln primarily finishes steel substrates, but some stainless steel and aluminum (both with anodizing and hard chromium) are finished at the shop.

Background

Like many successful American companies, Lincoln Plating began with a man and his vision. More than 50 years ago, Dale LeBaron purchased a failing plating shop in downtown Lincoln. He started small, struggling at first. The shop, however, experienced slow and steady growth through the 1950s and 60s.

As corporations began to expand in the midwest, Lincoln Plating successfully marketed to the new businesses while expanding its process base to meet increased demands.

When Dale's son Marc graduated from the University of Nebraska, he joined the company and became instrumental in managing the business. In 1976, the company had reached a point where some critical decisions had to be made.

Like other finishing companies, the Lincoln was faced with new, more stringent local and national environmental standards. A decision was made to go in debt and build a modern plating facility on 30 acres of land. From the capital spent on the new facility, more than 50 percent was used to construct one of the industry's most modern waste treatment facilities.

The shop has continuously adapted and expanded to meet new environmental and quality standards, as well as a continuous growth in the volume of business processed at the facility. As a result, today the company serves a national customer base.

Plating Processes & Substrates

The company currently runs 26 finishing lines for plating and anodizing. Most parts are steel, but the shop does process some aluminum—both with anodizing and hard chromium—and stainless steel. The finishing lines include:



Plating lines are monitored constantly to ensure that parts are receiving the proper finish.



Quality improvement teams operate in all areas of the finishing facility to ensure that continuous improvement is the focus.

Company Serves Various Industries

The wide variety of finishing options available at Lincoln Plating has evolved from the diverse customer base that the company serves. "Being located in an agricultural state, and far from an industrial base, we have had to offer a diverse process base for a diverse clientele," said Steve Bauer, a spokesman for the company. The company primarily serves the automotive, recreation, agriculture and hardware markets.

In a market suffering from an economic downturn, Lincoln Plating has shown outstanding growth. Sales were up 29 percent in 2002. According to Bauer: "Sales in every aspect of our business increased by double digits, including plating, and value-added services."

To meet growing production needs, the largest expansion project in company history was launched last year. Completed in the fall of 2002, the first phase of an 80,000 ft² expansion project includes the largest of the company's five nickel chromium plating lines, a new learning center, a cafeteria, plus new facilities for maintenance and infrastructure for new plating lines in the future. In all, the shop has 215,000 ft² of production space.

Customer Service

Lincoln Plating has a track record of innovation when it comes to customer service. In 2002, the company held its 11th biennial "Customer Conference"—a finishing workshop held in the spring to bring customers together with national experts in metal finishing and supply chain management. The event drew 150 customers from 17 states.

Each year for the past 12 years the company has contracted with the Gallup Organization to contact its customers to score the company on performance, and offer recommendations for improving

quality, delivery and responsiveness. The 2002 survey produced outstanding scores in all areas. The annual survey helps the company keep track of how it rates with customers.

Quality Management

Lincoln Plating has earned certifications in QS 9000 and ISO 14001. The principles of continuous improvement drive the company's quality standards program. Last year, a "zero defects culture" was launched. To introduce the concept, an aggressive training program was implemented to train all people one-on-one on the principles of continuous improvement. Quality teams in place throughout the company make major contributions to the direction of the quality management program.

Environmental Management

Two years ago, Lincoln Plating became one of the first finishing companies to achieve the ISO 14000 certification. Since then, the company has continued to make advances in its approach to environmental protection. During the past year, the company has realized:

- An eight percent reduction in energy use;
- A 20 percent reduction in water;
- An 18 percent reduction in fuel.

Lincoln Plating has a strong history of environmental management. It was the first private company to receive the Nebraska Department of Environmental Control's Environmental Excellence Award. The company has also received the City of Lincoln's Environmental Excellence Award, and the "Keep America Beautiful" Industry Award.

Incentives

Lincoln Plating considers its 350 people its greatest asset. The work culture at the plant reflects the people-friendly management style, and is supported by a generous incentive program. A profit sharing program allows the staff to share in the company's success. In addition, the firm supports 401K contributions with dollar-for-dollar matching funds, up to six percent of salary.

The company also administers a highly successful wellness program. The firm is a three-time winner of the Wellness Council of America's Gold Award, and is one of only six companies in the nation to be invited to apply for the new Platinum Wellness Award.

Last year, Lincoln Plating people participated in more than 50 wellness events, including the Lincoln Plating Spring Classics, a new series of professional bicycle races held in southeastern Nebraska.

Strategic Positioning

"We realize how fortunate we have been to grow our business during difficult economic times," said Marc LeBaron, CEF, chairman and CEO of Lincoln Plating. "We also realize that our industry will continue to see significant change in the years ahead."

Many companies with internal plating operations have eliminated those departments and outsourced services to companies like Lincoln. "Our success has come from an understanding of how companies make these transitions smoothly," LeBaron added. "We are also seeing other manufacturers who want their finishing source to take more responsibility for the supply chain. This is especially true when the finishing component is a significant segment of part cost, or when the finish is highly technical or cosmetic."

The company's training program helps to keep its people informed in every area of the operation. "We invest heavily in training and people development," said LeBaron. "We have also gone outside our company and hired industrial or mechanical engineers to help manage these technically challenging projects." LeBaron says his company is positioned to meet the challenges of today's marketplace.

Value-added Services

One of its fastest growing divisions is Integrated Finishing Services (IFS). Last year, sales in this division grew by 39 percent, and represented 48 percent of the company's total sales.

IFS gets the plating company involved early in the product life cycle. Working with product designers, company engineers can help optimize part design for plateability. IFS provides customers access to metal finishing skills and knowledge at the point when they have

the greatest impact on quality and cost—during design. Once a part is ready for production, IFS project managers and engineers coordinate all necessary steps in the manufacturing process. As a result of the success of this program, many high-profile manufacturers have selected IFS as their Tier I supplier of finished parts.

Focusing on the Future

The economy continues to offer a serious challenge to the growth objectives of any finishing company, said Steve Bauer. "We have seen outstanding growth, in spite of national economic conditions, and we continue to believe there are good opportunities for capable companies to meet the needs of manufacturers with high-volume, high-tech finishing projects."

By using innovative approaches to solve customer problems, Lincoln Plating has positioned itself at the top of a competitive industry. *P&SF*

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