

## OPINION



## Don't discount the spirit, fortitude of U.S. firms

By Robert Grace  
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(Sept. 3, 2007) -- The epitaph of American manufacturing has been written many times. But somehow the patient is still breathing. He may no longer have the heart of an 18-year-old, but he's not on life support, either. He's a reasonably healthy middle-ager who has to work through some serious issues.

Those who fear foreign competition somehow have forgotten how many times U.S. spirit and fortitude have won the day in decades past. Sure, tens of thousands of U.S. manufacturing jobs have been lost, and in some industries they are likely to never return. And this is not meant to minimize the pain suffered by those affected.

But — as always — other, higher-value-added roles will rise in their place. Some will be in what we consider traditional manufacturing; some will not. Yesterday's typewriter repairman is today's IT technician.

Even now, there is no shortage of manufacturing success stories in North America's plastics industry. Consider, for example, this year's winner of Plastics News' Processor of the Year Award, Vermont-based Mack Molding Co., or Massachusetts' Mar-Lee Cos., which has carved a profitable niche for itself in specialized medical, packaging and consumer products sectors. Or Wisconsin's 106-year-old, family-owned Bemis Manufacturing Co., which pushes the envelope to apply innovative process technologies.

Then there's Minnesota's Donnelly Custom Mfg. Co., which has mastered the complexity of short-run molding to the point where it now handles 500 materials and 2,700 active molds a year. Or Missouri blow molder Alpha Packaging, which will grow to \$100 million in sales this year (from \$500,000 in 1985).

What do these disparate firms have in common? I've invited all of them to tell their stories at our PN Survival Boot Camp, a 1½-day business conference in Chicago from Sept. 13-14. The mission is to network, compare notes and discuss strategies. In addition to executives from all the above firms, the program includes Tom Murdough, who founded rotomolders Step2 Co. and Little Tikes Co.; Brian Jones, who steered Nypro Inc. to new heights; design titan Mark Dziersek; lean manufacturing guru George Koenigsaecker; Tim Erdmann, who learned automotive supplier lessons the hard way at now-bankrupt Pine River Plastics Inc.; and savvy industry consultants Jeff Mengel and Jack Avery.

A few issues ago, Jeremy Haft, founder of BChinaB Inc. in Washington highlighted the opportunity now facing U.S. manufacturers. On average, Haft said, it takes China 17 separate parties to make a product that would take us three. Effective quality and cost control in this environment is difficult. Additionally, Chinese consumers are buying more than ever — especially from the U.S.

American companies, Haft concluded, have a "once-in-a-century windfall opportunity to build value, make money and create jobs here at home." Seize the day.

*Grace is Plastics News editor, associate publisher and conference director.*