



Beacons of Hope

Firms Offer Dozens of Reasons to Look Ahead with Optimism

By J.D. Booth

Economic slump? Certainly in Michigan and elsewhere some fundamental economic forces (including the flow of credit) have had a devastating effect on companies, especially many connected with the automotive industry.

But all is, clearly, not lost.

Indeed, *Corp!* magazine, in our second annual review of Michigan's Economic Bright Spots, discovered dozens of companies, large and small, who are not weathering the storm but arguably riding above it altogether.

And while we've included a list of those we compiled (initiated from nominations and a subsequent review process involving industry experts) what may be even more important is gathering a sense of why-what is it about these Bright Spot companies that make them so successful when others might be succumbing to the ebb and flow of the economic tide?

We've identified six areas in which these successful companies stand out, some obviously in more than one.

Service

Let's begin with service, which for a number of companies becomes the essence of what sets them apart from the competition.

Take **Global Tooling Systems** for example. Ask Executive Vice President Ronal Bellestri what sets the Macomb Township company apart and he'll tell you in one word: service. "A perfect example of this was last October when a customer called us on Wednesday and said they were in trouble with some tooling. They asked if we could be in California for two months to help them make their deliveries. We had 24 people on a plane that Friday morning and they were working the same day."

No surprise, given the name, but **Service Express, Inc.**, an on-site hardware maintenance company, is another Bright Spots winner to openly market the idea of exceeding customer expectations.

In this case, the key to delivering on the service promise is the human factor. "We start by hiring the right people," says President Ron Alvesteffer of his 135-staff organization, 75 of whom work in Michigan.

Also giving full credit to its employee base for creating a service advantage is **MRA, Inc.**, a leader in mobile exhibit and event marketing with a specialization in custom vehicle solutions. CEO Harry Kurtz calls the firm's 46-employee complement its key ability to surpass its clients' needs and expectations.

As one might expect, having service at the top of its priorities is a natural one for **Michigan First Credit Union**, a six branch financial institution that boasts an even wider reach through its 19 in-school student branches. For President and CEO Michael Poulos the focus on delivering a positive member experience begins "the moment they stop inside one of the branches."

For 40 years, **TAC Worldwide** has been providing great people and great service. Jim Cowper, who heads TAC Engineering, says having built a "proud following" with major automotive manufacturers and suppliers in Southeast Michigan continues to pay dividends. "New customers like DTE Energy and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan demand a history and commitment to progress from their new partners," notes Cowper. "TAC has provided that."

Knowledge and Innovation

For **Strategic Staffing Solutions'** CEO Cynthia J. Pasky, knowledge is a powerful tool for differentiating the 19-year-old-company. "We have a unique depth of industry knowledge, meaning we know as much as, if not more about our customers' industry, than our customers do," says Pasky. "We listen to our customers, assess their actual needs and tailor solutions to directly address those needs."

Now approaching 50 years in business, **Shelving, Inc.** does exactly what its name suggests. And while the storage options have grown in what's approaching five decades (the firm was launched in 1960), CEO Joe Schodowski says customers have come to expect a higher standard. "We have more experience than any other firm in the shelving and storage equipment industry," he notes. "We are able to offer turnkey design and installation services with our own work crews." Indeed, living up to the firm's slogan- "We make space work better"-requires nothing less.

It's been eight years since Richard Sheridan, now president of **Menlo Innovations LLC**, actually worked for someone other than the clients that flock to the Ann Arbor-based software development firm. Today, his 12 colleagues continue to "break all the rules"-with no walls, offices, doors or cubes. Sheridan likens it to Menlo Park, N.J., for which his software development firm is named. It's here that the modern Menlo has produced software for numerous industries, including health care, makers of scientific equipment and even high-fashion e-commerce operators and those involved with diesel motor diagnostics.

Just 10 years since it opened its doors, **LeanLogistics, Inc.** has made a name for itself, aligning with the CHEP global packaging consortium and leveraging one of the industry's largest transportation networks, says CEO Dan Dershem, who says combining technology and services gives LeanLogistics the ability to tailor transportation solutions to the needs of its customers.

While engineering companies capable of handling various projects are legion, **Advent Engineering Services, Inc.** has taken a different tack, concentrating on servicing as an "owner's engineer," with most of its work supporting the design, construction, licensing or operation of complex nuclear facilities. With just over two dozen employees on staff, the firm is organized into highly experienced, multi-discipline engineers, says CEO David A. Horvath. "The demand for Advent's services in the design, licensing, and construction of nuclear power plants in the U.S. is expected to increase dramatically, even under the most pessimistic projections of electrical power demand and new nuclear plant orders."

Creativity

Moon Valley Rustic Furniture has proven that "Made in U.S.A." can become a distinction, especially in an era where cheap offshore is all too ubiquitous. Designing and building its products from a 75,000-square-foot facility and retailing through a network of 2,150 dealers undoubtedly keeps the firm's 26 employees and CEO Richard Detkowski busy. But that's what drives its success. "Our design and quality of product is what sets us apart from the competition," says Detkowski. "It allows families to come together, at picnics, campfires, or just sitting on the porch swing with loved ones."

Looking ahead is a big part of what makes the **Farbman Group** so successful, says CEO Andrew V. Farbman of the full service real estate services firm this father, Chairman Burton Farbman, launched in 1976. "We encourage team members to look ahead and identify potential opportunities, staying ahead of the curve and taking risks when appropriate," says Andy Farbman. "This has helped us to continue to grow while other companies continue to downsize."

Even when the automotive tooling industry was healthy and profitable, **Models & Tools** never abandoned its focus on serving the aerospace industry with the tight tolerance required. By the time the automotive industry faltered, the 81-employee firm had already allocated resources to the aerospace sector, the result being continued growth in revenue. But that's just part of the story. In reality, bidding on aerospace assembly tooling projects starts with very little information being provided by the customer. "People's ingenuity, creativity and the ability to conceptualize and visualize what is required becomes critical," notes CEO Jeff Cunningham.

Reputation

A risky business? When Max B. Van Wyk opened the doors to his firm 27 years ago, it might have seemed like it. But he had a strong business plan and a determination to make sure his clients were well served. "The one thing that truly sets **Van Wyk Risk & Financial Management** apart from its competitors is the fact that we do not have commissioned sales people," says Van Wyk. "Our clients rest assured knowing that when we set up a long-term plan

to manage their risk, we do so only with their best interest in mind.” A 98 percent client retention rate is proof that the approach works.

Ask Managing Partner Bill Hermann what sets **Plante & Moran** apart from the competition and it's the firm's culture that figures prominently. “Our culture can be explained in two simple words, ‘We care.’ We care about our clients, we care about our communities, and we care about each other.” Not only that, but the firm demonstrates that value in a variety of ways, including a commitment to work-life balance, recognizing individuality, buddy programs, a generous paid time off policy and scholarship programs for children and staff.

Nemeth Murwell P.C. calls itself the largest woman-owned practice in Michigan that exclusively represents management in the prevention, resolution and litigation of labor and employment disputes. When CEO Patricia Nemeth and Linda Burwell launched the firm in 1992, they set out to build a reputation for excellence and continue to do so. Says Nemeth: “We’ve built our firm through amassing the depth of employment law knowledge that is attractive to labor and employment attorneys who want challenging cases in a collegial atmosphere. It is because we have a deep bench of attorneys that we are able to provide our clients with such a high level of legal council.”

According to CEO Douglas Selby, **Meadowlark Builders’** business proposition is unique: “We set the standard for sustainable building while delivering the highest quality craftsmanship and customer service.” Delivering on that promise includes offering a complete service, from design to advanced building techniques, to high-efficiency HVAC work, to custom cabinetry and finish details. The company does much of the work in-house, which gives customers better pricing as well as Meadowlark control over quality and delivery. “We work hard to make our clients’ experience with the building process as quality-driven as the work itself,” says Selby.

When **LimnoTech** CEO Paul Freedman opened the company’s doors in 1975, the co-founder wrote the firm’s mission statement. It was decidedly “save the world” in its tone: “do cool things with computers, work with good people and – most importantly – help save the water environment.” Since then, Freedman, an engineer by training is doing very specific things to realize that vision; including listening to the clients he and LimnoTech 78 employees serve. “Our ability to determine and even anticipate the specific environmental needs of clients – and then to help them resolve those issues – sets us apart from our competitors,” says Freedman. Even if it means changing nature itself. “An example of this is our project for the Lower Don River in the city of Toronto, a site of urban decay badly in need of restoration. A significant requirement of the restoration was a river redesign that would efficiently accommodate highly variable flows during wet and dry weather.”

For more than a century, the architectural firm founded by **Albert Kahn** has been making headlines – and setting trends. Indeed, Kahn is said to have virtually invented sustainable design, being the first to incorporate the use of daylight and natural ventilation into designs for both factories and office buildings. Even though his formal education ended at grade five, the firm’s founder put five brothers through the University of Michigan, most graduating with architectural or engineering degrees. Today the firm continues its groundbreaking progress, with more than 100 employees who are LEED Accredited Professionals, recognized as such through the U.S. Building Council’s program for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. CEO Stephen Q. Whitney says the firm’s continuing emphasis on meeting clients’ needs is proof of its success.

Cost Savings

As one of the country’s leading custom service integrators, **Vendor Managed Solutions** is changing the face of the supply chain and how its clients implement their purchasing operations, materials management, logistics and inventory programs. As CEO Rumia Ambrose-Burbank explains, the firm’s success is no accident. “We are very deliberate in our approach to consolidation our clients’ purchasing operations as well as customizing a broad spectrum of

viable value chain solutions.” By reducing costs of procurement by a typical 25 to 35 percent, clients can focus their organizations on core competencies and higher value-added activities.

A supply chain management services firm, **Osiris Innovations Group** works with its clients to “make supply chain management a more transparent and efficient process for both suppliers and buying organizations.” With that in mind, CEO David Saroli launched the firm in 2004, his vision being to automate the so-called procurement to payment process. He appears to have succeeded, having been recognized by the industry he serves. His clients would likely agree – typically they achieve savings of 7 to 12 percent, often the difference between surviving or failing in the current economy. Part of the benefit is being able to automatically connect to customers’ e-procurement environments, thereby automating the process.

A document management, workflow automation and process improvement company, **ImageSoft Inc.** uses industry leading software (including OnBase) to deliver faster return on investment to its clients, most within one year of working with ImageSoft. CEO Scott Bade says that advantage has served the company well. “It’s one of the reasons that our product is the most widely deployed document management solution in counties and municipalities throughout the state of Michigan.”

In today’s tough times, money is on everyone’s mind. But regardless of the business climate, there are always opportunities for a firm like **Hennessey Capital**, launched in 2002 as part of a group of companies whose missions include real estate and angel investing. Simply put, Hennessey Capital provides working capital solutions for growing business-to-business companies that might be described as “pre-bankable” but most post-revenue, in transition or otherwise not meeting the credit guidelines of traditional bank lending. As Mike Semanco, the firm’s president and COO, explains, speed has a lot to do with Hennessey’s success. “We are a small, but experienced team, allowing us to understand and adapt quickly to changes in the market conditions and respond to the needs of our clients promptly and with confidence.”

Now in its seventh year, **Georgetown Utilities Enterprise, LLC** has a simple motto: “We place clients in a better financial position than we find them.” It does it through energy conservation, on both the demand and supply side of the equation. With just 11 full-time employees, but access to a cadre of contractor and consultant resources, Georgetown tackles the opportunity of reducing cost at every level, including energy auditing, acting as a brokerage for natural gas and electricity, and consulting on a customer’s choice of deregulated sources of energy. Georgetown will also help a client reduce its use of energy, helping to drive out cost without compromising quality or impacting internal operations. In a timely addition to its services, the company is marketing units designed to address any airborne biological contamination such as swine influenza in public buildings.

Enabling

Founded in 1995 on the premise of providing technology management and support solutions for small to medium-sized business, **Vision Computer Solutions** has done what it promised. And more. Today, the firm will even go to a client’s home, where it provides expert compute repair or even computer purchase advice. CEO David Marino says the approach fulfills a need Vision saw from its inception. “We recognized a need in this industry to provide high-level support and solutions to businesses that normally would not have access to such resources. Most small businesses do not have the resources to hire the quality of IT administration that we employ, so by taking advantage of our services they end up with the benefits of this skill set without having to pay the salary.”

Giving companies the information they need is something that every organization can promise. **iDashboards** does it, through a suite of business intelligence software tools that uses patented “visual intelligence,” displaying real-time information, but without the expensive consultants typically required of competing products. CEO Shadan Malik says siDashboards, founded in 2004, delivers immediate value in a short time. “The entire organization experiences

the benefits of real-time operational intelligence, having a direct impact on the bottom line.” The idea behind iDashboards is brilliantly simple. “Now more than ever, businesses are required to do more with less,” says Malik. “With mounting pressure for people to produce and demonstrate their value, organizations are seeking affordable solutions for ensuring every budget item remains on track. iDashboards offers a unique visual reporting t\solution that can be used in any industry across the enterprise.

“Masters of their craft.” That’s how **Eview 360’s** CEO Melissa Centra describes the 18 employees in two company locations – Farmington Hills and Dubai. Certainly that’s important for any organization that supports a client’s brand across print, Web and three-dimensional environments. The firm’s licensed LEED Accredited Professional architects, interior, graphic, as well as application developers, marketing executives and 3D modelers, work together to deliver powerful brand messages. Recently, the firm worked with Tessera Executive Search, not only defining their brand values and making sure their message was consistent to all environments, but designing their corporate office to enhance the brand experience.

It’s easy to fall in love with **Brandmotion’s** products, especially if you hate the idea of leaving your technology behind when you get behind the wheel; Brandmotion is creating its won brand of magic – by integrating the convenience of iPods and even navigation systems on an aftermarket basis. And they do it in a way that makes t look like the work was done at the factory. As CEO Jeff Varick explains, Brandmotion has been offering standout solutions since its debut at the 2005 SEMA show, the annual event organized by the Specialty Equipment Market Association. “We address the need consumers have for better designed, better integrated solutions for using portable electronics conveniently and safely in the car,” says Varick. “Most mass market solutions clutter the vehicle with cigarette lighter cords and suction cups that are not well integrated, and not particularly safe to use in the vehicle. Our solutions pull from our experience as automotive designers, and are closer in appearance and function to what the car companies eventually may provide, but at a fraction of the cost.”

Ever wonder how the electrical power you user on an everyday basis actually gets to your or business? Few do, in large part due to the reliability of Michigan based **ITC Holdings Corp.**, said to be the nation’s first and largest fully independent transmission business. Formed when DTE Energy divested itself of the high-voltage tower part of the power utility (and led by the former head of the business, now ITC Holdings’ CEO Joseph L. Welch), the firm quickly staked its claim as one of the industry’s movers and shakers, going from one of the worst in class as far as reactive maintenance was concerned to one of the best in just a year. Today the firm is operating in five states (including Michigan) and has 320 employees. A recent initiative is its Green Power Express, a type of superhighway corridor that will facilitate the movement of power from wind turbines and solar farms to where it’s needed, the essence of ITC’s core business.

As one of the best-recognized names among private business-centric educational institutions in its market, **Walsh College** continues to offer practical, accessible business education to the residents of southeast Michigan. As President Stephanie W. Bergeron explains, a commitment made when the school was founded in 1922 stands firm, even as the area struggles. “We are committed to helping our community survive the crisis, learn from it, and come out of it stronger, more responsible and prosperous,” says Bergeron.

Editor’s note: See our story about all of the 2009 Michigan’s Economic Bright Sport winners at www.corpmagazine.com