

CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

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From the manufacturing beat: Illuminating the parts that make up the world



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The best part of being a reporter is getting to constantly learn. You get to skip the small talk and focus on what people are passionate about. And on the manufacturing beat, you get to really learn how the world works.

I went on my first plant tour shortly before officially starting at Crain's Cleveland Business.

I had a little break between my last job and my then-new one, but I was excited to get started. There was an event going on at Thogus in Avon Lake, and I was invited to attend as the paper's new manufacturing reporter.

Thogus is a plastic injection molder, working with customers to make parts to their specifications. That tour was my first real glimpse at all the work that goes into making the products we use every day.

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I was talking to the president and CEO of Sweeping Corp. of America recently, and something he said really struck me. Sweeping Corp. in Seven Hills runs fleets of power sweeping trucks across the country. While discussing the company's growth, Chris Valerian jokingly apologized, saying I was going to see debris on the road everywhere I looked now.

And he was right! But it goes so far beyond just noticing the litter on the highway. I find myself admiring the art in a piece of hardware when I'm supposed to be doing a home improvement project or wondering how a particular product in the store is made. I don't have that innate ability to make something out of nothing. But getting the opportunity to write about manufacturing for most of the past decade has opened my eyes to all those behind-the-scenes parts of the world.

Northeast Ohio is a great place for that. Cleveland and Akron and Youngstown have long been known for their manufacturing prowess, sure. But where we really stand out is in the supply chain.

According to a recent report from MAGNET, the region is home to about 10,000 manufacturers — the vast majority of whom, 98%, are small or midsize businesses. That ranges from the large steel mills to the contract tool and die shops, from the injection molders to the metal stampers, and from the 3D printing startups to the century-old family businesses.

The story of manufacturing is often one of flexibility and adaptability. It's a rare company that can celebrate a century without some change along the way.

Take Mika Metal Fabricating in Willoughby, an 82-year-old sheet metal fabricator, for example.

Mika Metal had been a family business for decades before president Ryan Michael Thomas and a partner purchased it in August 2020. The company got its start making duct work and, during World

War II, products like ammo cans for the U.S. military, Thomas said. Today, the company serves a diverse customer base, making everything from sterilization baskets for the health care industry to electrical enclosures for telecommunications.

Thomas said there's a real "complexity" to the products the company makes. Taking it from a print drawn up by a customer to finished product requires considering how to cut the metal, how to weld it, whether to coat it.

"I think a lot of people look at a cart or a basket and think, that's pretty simple, right? And there's a lot that goes into it, in terms of engineering, figuring out the metal and how do you build the product so it meets the customer's standards," Thomas said.

Every single thing we buy or borrow or use is made by someone who has taken an idea and figured out exactly how to make it a reality. We place our trust in manufacturers every time we get on a plane or sit on a chair or run a dishwasher. Whenever we start up our cars or visit the doctor's office for a checkup. Whenever we turn on our computers or rest on our beds at night.

Their work often goes unnoticed, if they've done it right. But it's work that deserves notice, and appreciation. And I'm grateful that I can play a small role in sharing their stories with the world and making sure that you, too, notice the pieces and parts of which it's made.

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