

PRODUCTION LINE SYSTEMS

Quality drives growth at Systematix



MATHEW MCCARTHY, RECORD STAFF

Systematix president Mike Becker, left, CEO Cecil Bauman and sales director Rob Veldhuis stand next to an assembly and test system in the company's factory on Frobisher Drive in Waterloo.

Dave Pink, Special to The Record

In a world increasingly intolerant of shoddy products and frustrated by all-too-frequent product recalls, there's never been more pressure on the companies that make things. In turn, there's never been more expected from the companies that make the things that make things.

And that's been great for business, says Michael Becker, president of Systematix Inc., a Waterloo manufacturer of production line systems. "There's an emerging value being placed on quality," he says. "Our customers are seeing the value in quality, and we can help them with that. It's not just about producing reliable machinery, but producing the machinery that can make reliable parts."

Systematix was launched in 1988 by Steve Errey and several partners as a spinoff of a company called Grip Clinch Canada to meet the production line needs of window and door manufacturers. Errey purchased the company outright in 1991 and Cecil Bauman joined as a partner in 1992. Bauman, the company's current CEO and his wife, Ruth Anne Bauman, assumed full ownership when Errey retired in 2009. From windows and doors, Systematix sidestepped into the auto parts industry. In recent years, it has been expanding rapidly into the medical and pharmaceutical industry, giving it a more international scope.

The business has changed drastically since the company was founded 26 years ago, with greater and greater emphasis on the technology that can complement the mechanics. The company's assembly line systems are the culmination of the evolution of vision technology and improvements in computing power that allow the machinery to

collect data. Cameras and high-speed sensors built into the assembly machinery can detect something that's not quite right and reject the problem part long before it's put into production. Many of these high-tech assembly components come from local suppliers.

"It's our job to identify and adopt innovative technology systems that help our customers increase the reliability and efficiency of their production process and the quality management of their products," says Rob Veldhuis, the company's sales director. "This can include anything from the latest vision inspection systems using cameras from Teledyne Dalsa (of Waterloo) to an innovative conveyor technology."

It's a good time to be in the automation industry. "Right now there are some companies with strong balance sheets, and there's an opportunity to make their production more efficient," says Becker. And after several years of watching as North American industries moved their production offshore, he says industry statistics are showing a strong inclination on the part of industry to stay or return home.

Whoever the customer is, quality is the priority when it comes to production lines. "The focus is on the early detection of defects," says Becker. "Now we can do pre-inspection prior to assembly. From the start we can know where the problem is, before we get all the way into production... It's all about risk mitigation with these guys."

On any given day, there may be 20 different projects being put together on the Systematix factory floor. The assembly line systems – worth anywhere from \$10,000 to \$8 million each – will turn out everything from transmission gears to

intravenous bags. Many products turned out on Systematix-built production lines wear 2-D barcodes that enable access to essential data collected during assembly and test processes. Through this technology, a nurse in a hospital ward can scan the barcode of a medical device to determine if it is part of a product recall.

The company has seen growth of about 25-percent growth in the last three years. About 100 full-time employees, including machine builders, machinists, controls programmers and electricians, work in the company's 50,000-square-foot factory on Frobisher Drive.

"In a custom engineering environment it's always a challenge to find candidates with the right mix of technical expertise and creative problem-solving skills who are also team players," says Bauman. "We have many people applying for positions, but they can expect a rigorous screening process to ensure they are the right fit," Bauman says.

Many of the company's projects begin with customers bringing in the part to be mass produced. "Then we ask ourselves, 'How can we turn them out on an assembly line?'" says Becker. "Often we have to create concepts and make revisions right on the table," he says. "It's a creative process. They will have certain standards we will have to meet, and we will apply some innovation on top of that."

Each piece of machinery is custom made. From the time a customer walks in the door to the delivery of the final product could take a mere 24 weeks. "We're competitive because we have a quick turnaround time," says Becker. "We get a lot of repeat business." ■