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Syracuse Castings shows how to succeed in manufacturing

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Dennis Nett / The Post-Standard

Mark Pulver is CEO of Syracuse Castings Sales Corp.

Mark Pulver and friends were walking through the cobblestone streets of Montreal. Pulver seemed distracted. Finally his wife, Dayl, apologized to their friends. He's just looking at manhole covers, she told them.

Pulver likes to tell that story to illustrate the single-minded passion that helps a manufacturer to flourish.

Pulver is the CEO of **Syracuse Castings Sales Corp.**, one of the manufacturers that are sometimes unnoticed but thriving in Central New York. Syracuse Castings makes products such as manhole covers, sewer grates and hatches.

While large factories have closed in CNY, small manufacturers such as Syracuse Castings are doing well. The

company employs 80 people at its headquarters on South Bay Road, in Cicero, and another 17 in Tooele, Utah.

Manufacturing has changed in recent decades; it no longer resembles an assembly line, said Randy Wolken, president of the **Manufacturers Association of Central New York**. Wolken said the United States remains the world's leading manufacturing nation, and New York ranks as the nation's sixth-largest manufacturing state.

The five-county CNY labor region — Onondaga, Cayuga, Cortland, Madison and Oswego — had 754 manufacturers at the end of 2009, directly employing more than 33,000 people, according to MACNY.

Wolken said successful manufacturers rely on innovation, technology and skilled labor. He said




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Syracuse Castings is typical of local companies that succeed in manufacturing and compete globally.

The Post-Standard asked Pulver to share his perspective on success. Here's a condensed and edited version of his response, as well as his answers to questions about his company.

We are an extremely flat organization, working in teams dedicated to lean manufacturing concepts. Our people are always challenged to learn and to problem-solve across all areas of the company. We depend on everyone to contribute ideas and continually improve our business, hence the "Better by Design" tagline.

Better by Design signifies our commitment to continually improve our organization, our

processes and our products. It means that we must always work together to improve ourselves, our workplace, our processes and our product. We believe that this effort is never static; we are either improving or backsliding. We choose improvement.

Small manufacturers create high-performing cultures that focus efforts on their customers, products and processes. They pick and choose the best, most-effective technology, processes and dedicated people.

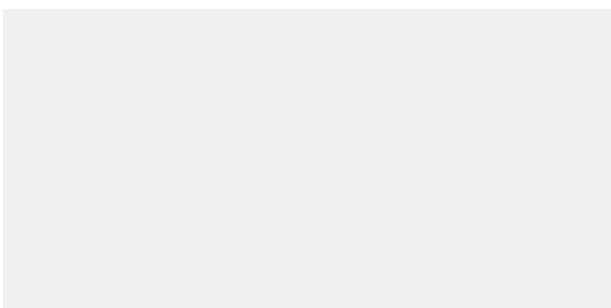
The speed of learning and adaptation of these companies makes them highly competitive. They are engines of innovation, often sought out by large companies as strategic partners.

All of us want to work at jobs in which we can make a difference. We take satisfaction in the families that flourish as employees make careers, in the customers that benefit, in our products that improve the world. Small manufacturers allow their leaders to live out their core values as they create a culture that is a reflection of themselves, their faith and their dedication to bettering our world. This is the essence, the fuel that makes innovative small manufacturers successful.

The passion of the leaders of small manufacturers is the precious fuel for success.

What keeps your company in Central New York?

People and relationships keep us in Central New York. We have great customers that are, honestly, friends. Regional sales manager Bill Bryant lets customers know we care about them and the success of their businesses.



The support we receive from customers like Paul Joynt, of **Lan-Co Development Inc.**, of North Syracuse, and Forest Tarolli, of **Orchard Earth & Pipe Corp.**, of **Solvay**, confirms that, as we care about them, they also care about Syracuse Castings and our success. We could never leave them.

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Mark Pulver is the CEO of Syracuse Castings. Syracuse Castings Sales Corp. is one of the manufacturers that are sometimes unnoticed but thriving in Central New York. Syracuse Castings makes products such as manhole covers, sewer grates and hatches. Dennis Nett/The Post-Standard

 [Syracuse Castings gallery](#) (6 photos)



We have tremendous vendors in CNY like [Nucor Steel Auburn Inc.](#), in Auburn, and [Elderlee Inc.](#), a galvanizing and steel-fabricating company in Oaks Corners, Ontario County.

Finally, our employees keep us here. People like Suljo Begovich and Bruce Hart. Suljo is a refugee from Bosnia, extremely smart and dedicated to the company, who worked as a machinist and is leading us forward with advanced computer-aided design and

manufacturing. Bruce has worked at Syracuse Castings for more than 29 years and knows more about municipal castings than anyone I know.

I am dedicated to Central New York. I grew up here, raised my kids here and will continue to call CNY home. My community and church, in Chittenango, are a large part of who I am.

How do you use technology?

Technology has been an important tool to continually increase productivity. Three key technologies have been important to our success:

- Welding robotics.
- Computer-aided design and manufacturing, or CAD/CAM.
- Computer-controlled machinery.

They did not create immediate large successes but set the stage for significant growth and success as we learned how to use each technology effectively.

We bought our first welding robot in 1984. It was far inferior to modern robots and proved difficult to get running. We spent about a year working on that first robot before it was really useful.

Today, they are far easier to use. We use four welding robots and recently bought five more. We will do the system integration in-house over the next six months. They are a tool for welders to significantly increase their productivity.

We began using computer-aided design around 1990. It provided an effective way to turn our customers' inquiries into products quickly and unleashed the creativity of our sales staff. Our early adoption was important to our success and is a key technology as we go into the future and combine computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing, sales and accounting into fully integrated systems allowing mass customization and low cost.

As we integrate CAD, sales and accounting, manufacturing operations are also being integrated through the use of CNC machinery. Very soon products designed by a salesman, or even the customer, through simple controls on our website will create the programs that make the products on networked computer-controlled machines. It is an exciting time to be a small manufacturer.

Does your company invent new products and generate patents

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The genesis of our patented products are interesting stories.

Our parabolic manhole cover came from the use of an advanced engineering tool called finite element analysis. We studied the stress distribution of a simple plate-style design and recognized the parabolic profile of the stress distribution. Now, it's become a design widely used all over the country.

The "Safe Hatch" invention presented itself to Tim McKernan, who was our operations manager at the time and is national sales manager. Tim completely turned around safety at Syracuse Castings, as he diligently applied the concepts of risk identification, elimination or mitigation through our active safety team. This yielded a great safety record. Surprisingly, it also yielded a new product line.

Tim applied the risk concepts to our hatch product line and one of the most severe safety problems in our country: falls. People were killed every year falling into pump stations and other deep underground structures before Tim introduced the "Safe Hatch" invention. This simple, yet extremely effective safety device is used throughout the U.S. and Canada. We are convinced that it has saved lives.

Describe the changes in management philosophy that helped employees buy into changes?

In 1998, we adopted a team-based management structure. Bob Wrona, with the [Central New York Technology Development Organization](#), led us as we began the process of implementing the new organizational structure. It was a difficult at first as conflict and organizational failures seemed to explode.

In the end, it was the right decision. We remain a flat, team-based organization. It has provided a platform for low costs, quick learning and quick response.

What allows you to compete in a global market from a Syracuse-area location?

Tim McKernan and I both completed [executive MBA programs at SU](#). This and books like Michael Porter's "Competitive Advantage," "Strategy Maps" by Kaplan and Norton, along with a TDO course by professor Dana Hart, led us to develop strategic plans for the company.

We adopted two complimentary strategic objectives that, in hindsight, yielded great results.

The first was to cultivate a reputation for innovation and innovative products while extending our name recognition throughout the country through promotional marketing efforts.

Second, we sought out strategic partnerships with large companies that could provide the sales and distribution structure we needed to grow our sales.

What advice would you share with an entrepreneur hoping to grow a business as yours has?

Three things come to mind.

First is persistence. It seems to me that a strong will to persist for as long as it takes is the first ingredient for individuals and organizations. We have the ability to achieve whatever we want, but we can't have everything. Focus and concentrated effort is the key.

Second is a willingness to fail and always learn from mistakes. Many of my efforts have ended in failure, some dramatic.

Thirdly, I have benefited from being a dreamer, always trying to peek behind the curtain to understand what makes things tick. It is what makes life interesting and fun for me, and I think it has helped me in business.

About Mark Pulver

- **Occupation:** He has worked at Syracuse Castings since 1971. He became CEO of the company when his father, Harry, retired in 1997.

- **Family:** He resides in Chittenango where he and his wife of 35 years, Dayl, raised three children, Erika, Derek and Marjorie, and are the grandparents of five.
- **Education:** He received a bachelor's degree in engineering from SUNY at Buffalo, in 1986, and an MBA from the Syracuse University Martin J. Whitman School of Management, in 1995.
- **Community activities:** He serves on the board of directors for CNY Works and for the Manufacturers Association of Central New York. He is active in The First Presbyterian Church of Chittenango and its Small Group Ministry.

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lightless September 12, 2010 at 2:25PM



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Is it just me or is the lack of any UNION involvement here a key ingredient to business success?

Just sayin' - nobody is tooting UNION Horns in this article.

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13207

September 12, 2010 at 10:21AM

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Looks like someone who understands you shouldn't place profit over quality of product and work environment. kudos.

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slim1h2o

September 12, 2010 at 10:25AM

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That's just one guy vs what other companies are doing, like having 3/4 of your employees being illegal immigrants like Dole has. The rest of his employees are Americans. BTW, he mentions a Mr Hart as being a good employee as well.....

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vfireman1

September 12, 2010 at 1:12PM

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I wish Mark Pulver & his company continued success, as well as the other 754 manufacturers mentioned in the local 5 county area. Lets see how many are left if the US Senate passes the US Houses version of the "Cap & Trade" legislation that will drive up these companies energy bills so much they will become non-competitive with foreign products. I doubt Mr. Pulver's company will be able to melt the steel required for his castings using Wind or Solar power.

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cusephan

September 12, 2010 at 7:18PM

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The advances in manhole cover technology drives a lot of other local innovation as well. The Chinese apparently couldn't be bothered, instead taking over industries with less certain futures like EVERYTHING ELSE. NOT TO TAKE ANYTHING AWAY FROM THIS GUY WHO INHERITED THE BUSINESS AND USED HIS NUMEROUS ADVANTAGES TO CONTINUE MAKING MANHOLE COVERS. Please put a fork in us.

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