

# W. Soule leverages union workforce, indoor fabrication in seeking new markets

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Gary Cline, corporate VP at W. Soule, said that the company has been challenged to stay nimble in the changing economic environment.

PHOTO BY NATHAN PECK



By Nathan Peck | MiBiz  
npeck@mibiz.com

KALAMAZOO—To be honest, the last two years have not been kind to the construction industry and manufacturers.

In spite of the conditions, industrial fabricator W. Soule & Company has seen demand for plug-and-play components rise as customers in the food processing, pharmaceutical and energy industries seek turnkey solutions. In a constantly changing environment, the Portage-based, 65-year old company is looking to stay nimble as it works to stay ahead of trends in the economy.

Corporate VP Gary Cline and marketing director Chris Gibbs sat down with MiBiz to talk about the company's growth coming out of the recession.

"We've stayed fairly steady — 2010 has been a relatively good year for us," Cline said. "We have done a reasonably good job following customers around the nation."

## Photo Gallery

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Employing 300, the company provides services ranging from custom equipment fabrication to pipe and vessel fabrication to millwright services and HVAC maintenance services. The third-generation, family-owned company has built a strong reputation for quality work with the largest organizations in Southwest Michigan, including Western Michigan University and the Kellogg Co. As a union shop, Cline said the company can flex



the size of its workforce easily and can gain access to a skilled workforce quickly as needs arise.

While the trades are typically thought of as working in the elements on job sites, Cline said the company's investment in manufacturing space in the Midlink Business Park five years ago has proven to be a sound investment. Working in a climate-controlled environment, W. Soule can custom-build components to tighter tolerances indoors than in the field.

"Years ago, we would have had a majority of our workers in the field. We picked up the fabrication to supplement our field crews, (and) it allows us to be flexible with the market the way it is," Cline said. "You have to be flexible or die. We've show flexibility to move from market to market quickly. That being said, you have to take care of your local customers."

The fabrication capability came at an opportune time, said Gibbs, as customers are looking for modular components for a variety of applications that are constructed at Midlink and then shipped to the site where W. Soule crews install them, cutting down on lead times for projects. Many customers have cut back on engineering staffs and the approval process stretched so long that when projects are green-lighted, they're already behind schedule. Customers increasingly look to the company to help take ideas sketched on the back of napkins and engineer equipment.

"It's a bit overused, but it's true: Our customers are doing more with less," Gibbs said. "They are relying on us to pick up the slack."

Today, a quarter of W. Soule's business is outside the state, and the experience has made the company more efficient as a result. The consequences of not having a tool in hand when the company works across the country are much more severe than when it's across town.

"We found it was very easy to find work outside of Michigan, where business was not hit as hard," Cline said. "To work out of state, you have to be extremely organized. You cannot make mistakes and (must) make sure crews have everything they need when they arrive. That helps you locally as well. When you learn to pre-plan projects outside the region, it helps you pre-plan projects locally."

Centralizing fabrication at Midlink has helped the company remain nimble as it finds new avenues for growth and redirects resources to new markets. In 2007, the firm was busy with work at ethanol plants, but as funding for ethanol projects dried up, Cline looked to drive growth in new markets. W. Soule recently achieved the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) Power Piping (PP) Authorization, which gives the company the ability to produce power piping under the applicable rules of the ASME Boiler and Pressure Vessel Code. The firm is looking to develop closer ties with the petroleum and energy industries, particularly in nuclear power.

"We are constantly looking for the next niche. We want to make sure we're ready when the next thing takes off," Cline said. "We want to be at the forefront. There is a very short window of time where you can get in on these industries."

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