

Industry Report

Fabricating Industry Holds on Despite Weak Market

Small players have found it easier to weather the storm.

By Dan O'Brien

It's a Tuesday afternoon and the atmosphere has quieted down at Northeast Fabricators Inc., Youngstown. The day before the plant buzzed with activity as workers put the finishing touches on a large scrap-metal transfer car bound for Allegheny-Ludlum Corp., a specialty steel producer in Pennsylvania.

"The crazy part of this business is it will be quiet one day and next week be helter-skelter," says Larry Snyder, sales engineer for Northeast Fabricators.

As would most manufacturers in the region, Snyder says his business could use more of those helter-skelter weeks. "You've heard it from all the mills that things are slow, that the market is soft," he says. "We're still keeping busy, but it's nothing like it was three years ago" when the economy was booming and there was plenty of work.

Northeast Fabricators specializes in fabricating heavy steel plate used mostly by industrial customers, says Neil "Red" Stertzbach, manufacturing engineer. The company makes transfer cars, coilers, mill housings, and components for presses, roll tables and slitters. "At this shop, we do burning, fitting, welding, thermal and vibrating stress relief, sand-blasting and painting," he adds.

One of the company's major assets is its ability to burn steel plate 12 inches thick for major industrial projects. "Our stress relief furnace is fairly big and we can lift 80,000 pounds in-house easy with our cranes," Stertzbach says.

Customers send the firm engineered drawings of a certain part or piece of equipment, Stertzbach explains. If a piece needs to be burned, the template is loaded onto a computer and a computer numerically controlled (CNC) burning machine reads the dimensions. Flames cut through thick steel plate and can etch out a part to the precise specifications. Once burned, the piece is fitted and welded into place to form a larger fabricated part.

PERFECT FIT — Don Delphine, fitter at Northeast Fabricators, refines a component to be included in a final fabricated part.

That part then undergoes thermal stress relief, which reduces the amount of stress placed on the metal as a result of welding. From there, the fabrication is sand-blasted to smooth out its exterior, painted and shipped out. "An average job takes about four to six weeks," Stertzbach says.

Quick turnaround is crucial in today's tight industrial market. "Windows for delivery time are shrinking," Stertzbach says, "but we're diversified enough to compete and meet deadlines."

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ONE LAST CHECK — Neil "Red" Stertzbach, manufacturing engineer at Northeast Fabricators (left) and Larry Snyder, sales engineer, look over a part before it's shipped to a customer.