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ENTERPRISE
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Gateway to growth: Fencing, concrete contractor seeks new strategies

[Rich Rovito](#)

On a recent scorching hot August afternoon, employees at [Munson Inc.](#) were busy pouring concrete for a permanent display at the company's Glendale headquarters.

The display will showcase Munson's concrete and asphalt services. An adjoining display will show off fence products.

A paving, fence and tennis court contractor, Munson is searching for ways to attract new customers. The display will be one way to attract new business and Munson plans a fall open house.

"We normally take samples out to our customers but they are very heavy and bulky," said Munson president and owner Robert Fetherston.

Munson is perhaps best-known for its fencing, its oldest line of business that accounts for about 40 percent of overall revenue. The firm recently landed a contract worth about \$800,000 to provide about five miles of fencing to secure We Energies' new coal-fired power plant currently under construction in Oak Creek.

Munson has annual sales of about \$6 million. Fetherston estimates annual sales growth to be in the 2 to 5 percent range. Fetherston said the company has a positive net income, but is not "overly profitable."

Much of Munson's business comes from repeat customers or word-of-mouth testimonials. In order to drum up new business, the company is considering creating a more formal advertising plan, said Rob Fetherston, the owner's son and the firm's sales and marketing director.

Munson also conducts regional seminars to generate business for its tennis court construction operations. A recent seminar led to a two-week tennis court repair project at the Vilas County Fairgrounds for the Greater Eagle River Tennis Association.

New lines

Finding other lines of business that are complementary is one of the biggest challenges facing the firm, Fetherston said. Munson has hired a Menomonee Falls business consulting firm, Outward Focus, to develop ways to grow the business.

Some of the moves the firm has made in recent years have come out of necessity, he said. For instance, Munson's decision to enter the stamped and textured concrete business in 1999 stemmed from problems it encountered when subcontracting for the service, Fetherston said.

A foray into slurry sealing a few years ago ended because the company was getting product from California, which proved cost prohibitive.

Munson also ventured into constructing running tracks but pulled out of the business a few years ago after being sued by another firm that claimed Munson had been using its proprietary process.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Munson is locating and retaining competent employees, Fetherston said.

"There are a lot of people out there who don't have a very good attitude about work," he said.

The best new hires often come from referrals from existing employees, Fetherston said. The company is willing to train workers who don't have extensive experience but have a proven work history, he said.

Munson employs a staff of about 50 during spring, summer and early fall. The payroll dwindles to about 20 during the winter.

The firm's work crews are represented by one of three labor unions: Operating Engineers Local 139; Laborers' Local 113; and Cement Finishers Local 599.

Munson has succeeded in attracting and retaining a core group of employees because of its year-round operations, said John Schmitt, business manager for the Laborers' union.

"They try to keep their employees busy," he said.

Competitive bidding

The company has struggled when bidding against non-union firms for jobs, Schmitt said.

The majority of Munson's customers are in southeastern Wisconsin. Munson's client list is varied and includes municipal governments and residential and commercial accounts.

The company recently performed paving work at Brady Corp.'s corporate headquarters, 6555 W. Good Hope Road, and factory, 2230 W. Florist Ave., Glendale.

Munson also resurfaced the tennis courts at the Helfaer Recreation Center at Marquette University, Fetherston's alma mater, in the official blue and gold colors of the school.

"Munson gave us a very fair price," said Bob Koster, construction manager at Marquette. "It's hard to find a company today that can do good work at a good price."

Last year, Kohler-based Kohler Co. hired Munson to provide three miles of permanent chain link fencing for the Whistling Straits golf course.

Munson has provided paving and fencing services on numerous occasions for Miller Compressing Co.'s metal and steel scrap yard at 1640 W. Bruce St., Milwaukee. Munson also installed temporary and permanent fencing at Badger Meter Inc.'s corporate headquarters, 4545 W. Brown Deer Road, Brown Deer.

The elder Fetherston, who is 56 years old, said he plans to continue operating the business for several more years before turning over day-to-day operations to his son, who is 30.

Munson's roots date back to 1955, when the company's founder, James Munson, launched Milwaukee Fence & Supply Corp. The firm added paving services and tennis court construction in 1963.

Fetherston and William Deglman purchased the operating assets of the firm in 1983. When Deglman retired in 1999, Fetherston bought out his share of the firm and became sole owner.

"We knew we weren't going to get rich when we got into this," Fetherston said. "For now, I still like the challenge of making things go and there's a lot here to manage."

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