Dynamic developments characterize Oxford Alloys' global progress

Oxford Alloys has supplied a broad range of welding wire and electrodes since 1970 and they have developed the knowledge, resources, and skills to satisfy the ever-increasing demands of a worldwide customer base. Their philosophy is "to help their customers achieve success by making their job easier through Oxford Alloys' efforts". It shows. Stainless Steel World last visited them in October 2009, returning at the end of 2010 to catch up with their CEO, Mark Ashworth, on what has been happening in the last fifteen months. Not surprisingly, we were to find many developments ongoing and that hard work, continual improvements, and the ambition to satisfy customers are words that are completely synonymous with this company.

By John Butterfield

Since 2000 Oxford Alloys has been fortunate to achieve very aggressive organic growth in terms of location, key personnel, revenue, customer base, product offering, and brand penetration. "When the worldwide economic slowdown occurred in 2009, we could have taken it as an opportunity to catch our breath and tread water until the demand for corrosion resistant alloys improved. However, that is not the Oxford Alloys approach," says Mark Ashworth. "As an organization, we always dedicate ourselves to improving and enhancing our company in every aspect."

The company was also very fortunate at that time to enter the market slowdown with a very strong balance sheet, which gave it the means to invest in its continuous improvement approach during this business cycle. "Now as the company enters 2011 and reflects on the past 1 ½ years", continues Mr. Ashworth "I am more proud of our team of employees than at any prior period because of their amazing efforts and accomplishments". "Our business methodology is a very tangible and simple 'nuts and bolts' approach," continues Mr. Ashworth, "but it has become a key factor in our success.

Our purpose is to make our customers' successful by making their jobs easier through our efforts. This philosophy means that we put service to our customers above all else and we infuse pride and enthusiasm into every task we perform. This requires us to be on our toes and ready to embrace change to keep ahead."

Excellent quality assurance of products

So what has been happening at Oxford Alloys during the past 18 months? To begin with, during 2010 the company upgraded its alloy verification technology and invested in three camera-enabled XRF instruments that provide precise chemical composition verification. "We use the instruments to validate the chemistry of every single heat of each product as part of our comprehensive receiving and inspection processes. As an additional step to guarantee precise chemistry per AWS/ASME standard for customers we also stamp each product label in red ink 'PMI' which stands for 'Positive Material Identification'. When our customers see this stamp they can be assured that we have verified the final product", says Mr. Ashworth. The chemistry verification test reports (which include a picture of the label) are then retained electronically in our customized alloy verification software. This level of product quality assurance right before the product enters the marketplace for consumption is leading in its field. Also, this new technology allows us to get accurate chemistries of very light elements such as silicon and phosphorous, which older XRF technologies do not permit. This provides us with the precision of chemistry testing needed to assure that every product we ship adheres to both AWS/ASME specifications as well as our own stringent internal specifications. In addition, for the more sophisticated companies with whom we are working like ExxonMobil and Petrobras, it is a necessary requirement."

Betterment in facilities

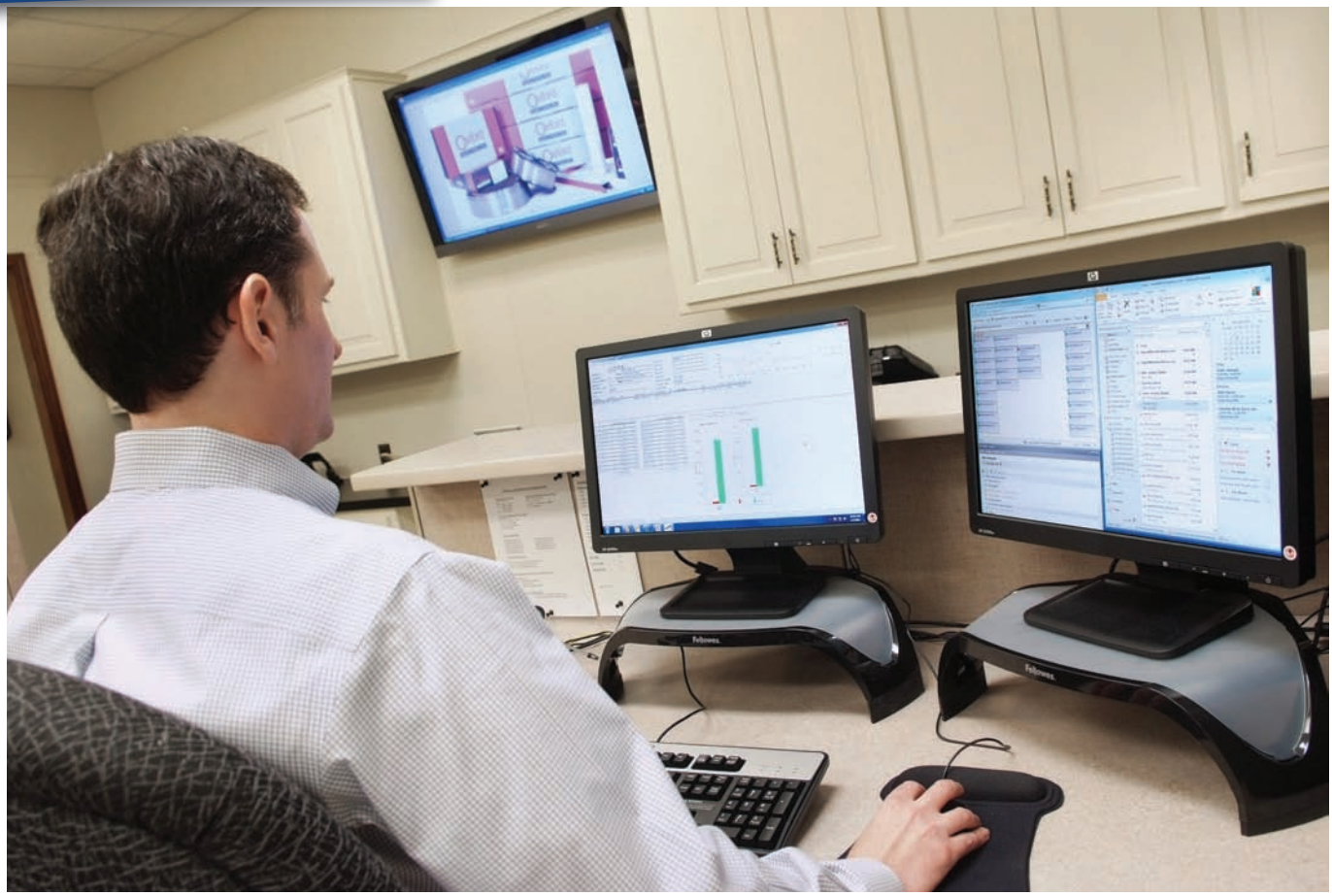
"Most recently we have officially opened our new Chicago, Illinois facility. We are very proud of this state-of-the-art premises, custom-built for us. This location will maintain our complete line of welding wire and electrodes as well as serve as an additional sales and customer service location. The facility is located close to O'Hare international airport which means that it can serve as our export hub, getting our products to our customers around the world, as we are now a truly global organization. An additional benefit is that it will provide us with better market penetration in the Midwest of the USA. The warehouse covers 15,000 square feet and a possible expansion doubling its size is already a being pursued", relates Mr. Ashworth.

Further, at the Baton Rouge facility they have been carrying out a complete physical overhaul of their warehouses and equipment facilities. This was needed as the original premises consisted of just one building, built in the 1970's. To this was added a new 20,000 square foot warehouse in 2006. Recently another 15,000 square feet of warehousing connected to the original facility underwent a refurbishment to blend in with the new facilities. This included everything from renewing the warehouse floors, improving insulation, updating the offices, providing a new data system, and improving the infrastructure. The overall impact of the changes has meant that they now have a more efficient and better working environment for their crew of staff.

Integrated communication system

Another investment that the company has made in 2010 has been in a brand new, completely integrated, state-of-the-art communications system. It includes real time video and pan tilt zoom features that connect everyone at all locations. This means that even though the company is spread out geographically over different locations, they are now simply just one seamless unit working together as if they were all in the same room. There is, moreover, now only one phone number

One of three camera enabled XRF instruments used to verify each products adherence to Oxford Alloys' stringent requirements.



Extensive use of customized technology including a 50 inch screen known as the Oxford Alloys' 'scoreboard'.

and one fax number in operation. The system has done much to further improve upon efficiency and the speed in which they can deal with servicing their clients in the best possible way.

The integrated approach towards communications falls into line with the global marketing approach of Oxford Alloys. "The growth in our industry is such that we can no longer think domestically in the US. It's a small world today and everything we are doing as far as investments in the company, infrastructure, products, etc. is focused on building a platform to support the continued global growth of our products," says Mr. Ashworth.

Prestigious product approval in Brazil

A particular feather in Oxford Alloys' cap has been that their brand Alloy 625 MIG & TIG wire as well as C-276 have been approved by the Brazilian Foundation of Welding Technology – the FBTS – with its head office in Rio de Janeiro. FBTS is a non-profit, private technological organization founded in 1982 by several Brazilian companies, including Petrobras, to control the quality of products used within the oil & gas industry. Oxford Alloys brand products were approved after extensive audits and product testing performed by FBTS over a six month period. "This achievement is a testament to the outstanding effort by Evan Wootan, our Quality Assurance Manager, as well as our entire QA group" relates Mark Ashworth.

ExxonMobil approvals

Further, ExxonMobil has approved the complete line of Oxford Alloys brand welding consumables in March of 2010 on a worldwide basis after intensive quality assurance reviews and audits. "Our products now support the fabrication and maintenance for ExxonMobil projects around the world, which is an achievement we are tremendously proud of, and have worked very hard to obtain."

New product range

On another note, taking into account the needs of customers also means continually keeping the range of products

up to date and expanding on them where necessary. Some of Oxford Alloys' new products include:

- Alloy 825 (ERNiFeCr-1) in MIG and TIG wire forms
- Alloy 2594 super duplex all position flux core wire
- Alloy 625 (EQNiCrMo-3) welding strip in 30mm and 60mm
- Modified Stainless steel electrodes
- Flux for SAW welding of stainless steel.

As a result of their global marketplace presence they have expanded their product range to include alloy 825 (UNS N08065). This new stock item is available in MIG wire and TIG wire form for immediate delivery. It is sold through welding supply distributors but ultimately it is being used in the overlay market, in the cladding industries, and in the oil & gas industries. Mr. Ashworth takes up the story: "the flexible business model that we have enables us to react quickly to shifts in demand and enhance our product portfolio accordingly. The increase in demand for alloy 825 is because it provides a more cost-effective solution for certain applications. 2594 flux core wire was a natural addition to our fast growing line MIG, TIG, and SMAW super duplex products. Our E2594T1-AP is an all position wire that is designed to weld super duplex stainless steels as well as low alloy steels to duplex stainless steels. Another perfect addition is our new -17 coating stainless steel electrodes. These are a modification of the –16 electrodes in that considerable silica replaces some of the titania in the flux coating. The 17 coating provides a smooth arc transfer in the flat and horizontal positions and the slag is self-peeling".

Other new additions to Oxford Alloys extensive line of corrosion resistant welding alloys includes some completely new product forms: "We have always provided MIG, TIG, SAW, FCAW, and electrodes, but currently we have added welding strip and SAW welding flux to our product portfolio," says Mr. Ashworth. "The increased demand for welding strip comes not only from the USA but also from our global customers. We are excited to now offer alloy 625 (EQNiCrMo-3) welding strip with a very low iron content combined with a perfect blend of quality and price competitiveness." The addition of flux for SAW welding of stainless steels was necessitated by demand from customers who are regular purchasers of Oxford Alloys stainless steel SAW wire. "We are now positioned to offer a complete package of perfectly matched wire and flux for SAW welding of stainless steels."

Select Group of High Achievers

On the personnel front, the company has recently promoted several key employees. Evan Wootan has been promoted to Quality Assurance Manager and is responsible for the management and oversight of the company's entire ISO 9001-2008 quality program which includes product inspection, chemistry verification, inventory management and process workflow. Chris Polanski has been promoted to Key Account Manager. Polanski has been with Oxford Alloys for 13 years and has demonstrated a consistent and enthusiastic approach to superior customer service. "Both Evan and Chris exemplify the high caliber team of professionals within our organization," says Mr. Ashworth.

Future plans

The infrastructural improvements that have taken place are intended to act as a springboard for Oxford Alloy as to execute their international expansion plans. Mr. Ashworth: "The cornerstone of our business model is providing quick responses to customer requests combined with immediate deliveries of consistent, quality assured welding consumables. Currently with locations only in the USA we are not in the optimum position to provide this high level of service to all of our global customers. Therefore our short- and long-term future plans focus on expanding our presence in key regions of the world so we can provide the same level of service and product availability to our growing international customer base. Our goal is not necessarily to be the largest supplier of filler metals – but rather to be the best supplier by constantly improving our organization in ways to provide value to our customers.

Quality Assurance Manager Evan Wootan and Quality Assurance Rep Demond Walker analyze a spool of Alloy C-276.