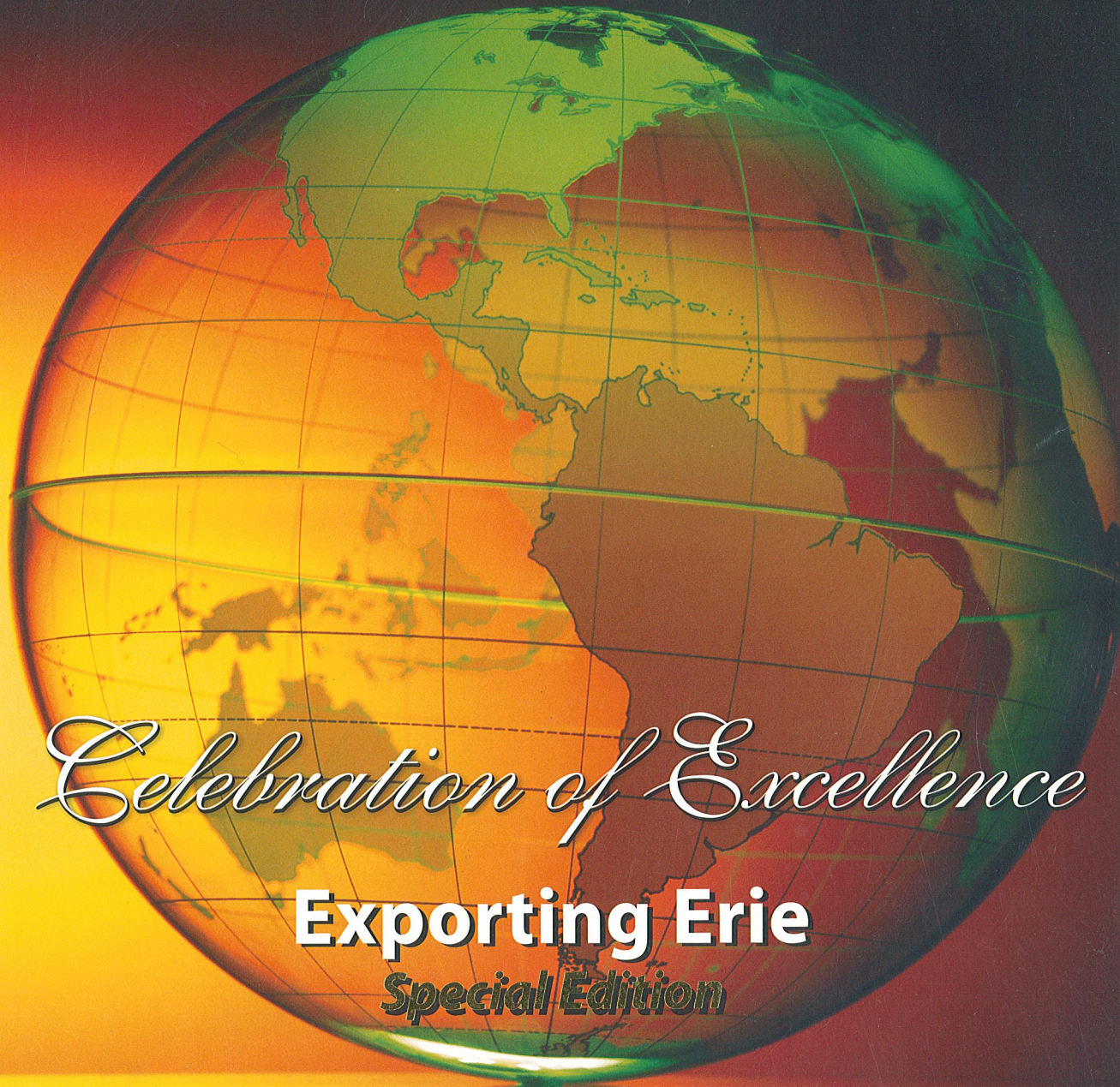


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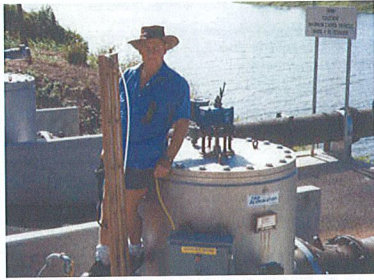
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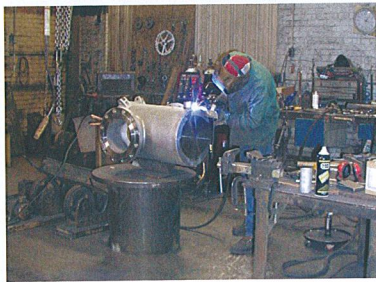
2010 Celebration of Excellence Winner

Fluid Engineering: Straining Toward

By Diane Chido



Les Briggs, FE's representative in Australia, stands next to an automatic self-cleaning strainer in a waste water treatment plant in Melbourne.



FE's lead welder, Hal Lewandowski, works on a simplex strainer vessel.



Fluid Engineering has supplied a wide variety of basket strainers to the Venetian Casino Resort in Taipa, Macau.

Fluid Engineering (FE), founded in 1986, produces filtration equipment for a variety of industries including traditional oil and gas, biofuels, power generation, pulp and paper, water treatment, and other manufacturing sectors. The company has been selling products across the U.S. and overseas from the beginning, through existing contacts of their parent company, TM Industrial Supply, Inc.

Fluid Engineering's automatic, self-cleaning strainers are often custom-designed for each client, so they must constantly evolve in their manufacturing processes. This has led to continual evaluation of their strategic planning, which serves the company well as economic tides shift.

Finding Opportunities Where Others See Threats

"Two years ago, we had record high sales, but in 2009, the banking crisis only brought us back down to normal sales levels," says President and Chief Operating Officer Heather Steiner. "But by this fiscal year-end in March, we will have recorded our second highest sales year. The economic downturn gave us a good opportunity to evaluate our efficiency and improve some processes."

"Product and customer diversity has been crucial to our continued growth, even in tough economic times," says Steiner. "We weather the storms because our products do not serve only one market."

"If the power industry is down, wastewater treatment might be up," she adds. "The same is true with foreign and domestic markets overall."

Research and development is a critical aspect of FE's success, with dozens of patents and several more in the pipeline, some in renewable energy. The company is also constantly tweaking existing products and processes to fit new markets. Even their off-the-shelf products are often tailored to customer needs.

Think Globally

"In today's world, you have to go international," stresses Steiner. "In 2007, foreign sales accounted for 90 percent of our revenues; without that, we wouldn't be in business today."

"This fiscal year we are down to 25 percent in foreign sales; however, many of our domestic sales end up being shipped internationally," she added.

Fluid Engineering has customers and sales representatives in Angola, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Oman, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and Yemen.

"The key is to know about the country before you go there," she says. "You need to understand and respect their customs."

Steiner has simple advice for other companies considering expanding into international markets: "Don't be afraid of it, the process is not that complicated."

"Our sales reps all speak English, as well as the local language, which makes our travel and meetings easy," she adds. "The most important thing is to get payment in advance or letters of credit."

Continued Worldwide Growth

Steiner says that many of FE's international customers expect that and it's often even easier to ensure payment from them than from some of the company's domestic contracts.

Partner Locally

"We have some local customers, including Chamber Investor HERO BX, and we've gotten a lot of support from local economic development agencies such as the Chamber and the Gannon Small Business Development Center," added Steiner.

The Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership has helped FE streamline much of its shipment processing paperwork. Fluid Engineering is an Investor in the Chamber.

"The Commonwealth's International Trade Office is also currently helping us find new sales representatives in Brazil, Egypt, and South Africa," adds Steiner.

"We are thrilled to be honored as part of the Chamber and Growth Partnership's Celebration of Excellence this year, especially since the other two awardees are our partners," she says. "Insurance Management handles all of our complex insurance needs and Logistics Plus tackles all of our international shipping so it's nice to be recognized along with our service providers, both of which really do an excellent job."

Fluid Engineering has supplied three automatic self-cleaning strainers to the Three Gorges Dam in China, the world's largest electricity-generating plant.

Key to Excellence

Steiner says the best advice she can give to other local firms is to make sure they do not grow too much too fast.

"We have learned to know when to walk away from a job that would overwhelm us," she says. "We constantly reassess our processes and markets and we began restructuring months before the recession hit, which really helped us to come through it unscathed."

Fluid Engineering



"One of our products will be part of the project to rebuild the World Trade Center."

—Heather Steiner,
Fluid Engineering President & COO

