

An Unexpected Requirement: “Become ISO 9001:2015 Certified”

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WISCONSIN MANUFACTURING
EXTENSION PARTNERSHIP

Industrial Nameplate faced a major dilemma when its largest customer, Oshkosh Corp., suddenly required all its suppliers to become ISO 9001:2015 certified.

The small Fox Valley manufacturer of industrial signs and labels had to decide whether to invest the time and effort, as well as the money, to satisfy the requirement or part ways with a vitally important, long-term client.

“Oshkosh has been a customer of ours since the early 1970s,” company co-owner Lynn Lanser said. “Of course, we didn’t want to lose their business.”

Nonetheless, the move caught Industrial Nameplate off guard. Uncertainty and frustration followed.

“They gave us a deadline and made it clear that they’d go someplace else for the business if we didn’t get certified,” Lanser said. “At first, you just blow it off because it’s just another big cost factor. We’re a small business. We can’t just throw out that kind of money. And what’s it going to do for us?”



“We didn’t know what ISO was and we’d never even heard of a quality management system,” Swanton said. “We had no idea who was going to help put this together for us. It was intimidating and we didn’t know what to do.”

Industrial Nameplate didn’t know where to turn, said Lanser’s daughter, Nicole Swanton, who co-owns the business and serves as its vice president.

“We didn’t know what ISO was and we’d never even heard of a quality management system,” Swanton said. “We had no idea who was going to help put this together for us. It was intimidating and we didn’t know what to do.”

Swanton was certain of one thing – she couldn’t lose Oshkosh’s business.

“That’s my future and I wasn’t willing to let that go,” she said.

Industrial Nameplate turned to the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership for assistance.

Lanser admitted that an initial meeting with WMEP manufacturing consultant Jennifer Arnold wasn’t exactly smooth sailing.

“As a business owner, you don’t want someone coming into your business and telling you what to do,” Lanser said. “We’ve been

doing great this whole time and then all of a sudden we’re going to have somebody put my business under a microscope and tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

It took time for the frustration to ease.

“My first meeting with Jen, I pushed back. I had an attitude,” Lanser admitted.



Lynn Lanser, Owner / President with
Nicole Swanton Co-owner / Vice President

Swanton described the ISO 9001:2015 certification process, which took nine months from start to finish, as “life changing.”

“It was the most challenging thing I’ve done in my career, but it was the most rewarding process I’ve ever been through,” Swanton said.

ISO 9001:2015 is an internationally recognized standard that spells out the criteria for a quality management system.

“You are changing everything. There was another pair of eyes coming in,” Lanser said. “I figured we were doing things very well, but then Jen came in and saw where we could improve things.”

A 5S workplace organization process turned out to be most beneficial to the company, Swanton said.

“Our shop didn’t have much organization,” she said. “We dove into each section and looked at extra parts and scrap material. We eliminated so much clutter and it made our processes that much clearer.”

Industrial Nameplate also revamped the way it handles inventory.

“We had a lot of inventory that was just stacked up in the back but nobody ever went through it,” Lanser said.

Some employees resisted the changes brought about by the process.



“The employees that kicked back at the changes didn’t understand why we were doing things,” Swanton said. “It’s hard to have someone come into your work space, but when they realized it’s for the greater good and it’s a team effort then they embraced it. When everyone got involved as a team it just rolled.”

Manufacturers that embrace the ISO standard actively prevent problems and employ a system to consistently improve their business, the WMEP’s Arnold said.

The quality management system needed to be the appropriate size for Industrial Nameplate’s small-scale operation, she added.

“That was my biggest concern,” Arnold said. “I wanted to make sure I didn’t overdo it. Overall, it was an incredible opportunity to work with Industrial Nameplate.”



Lanser’s father, Fred Ziegler, founded the business in the basement of the family’s home in the early 1960s under the name Thunderbird Industries.

“I used to help my dad back in the day,” Lanser said. “He ran Thunderbird part time and had a full-time job at Riverside Paper Corp. in Appleton.”

After incorporating, the company moved to downtown Appleton in

1980. It had just three employees at the time - Ziegler, Lanser and current general manager John Schuldes.

“Everything took off from there,” Lanser said.

In 2003, the name of the business changed to Industrial Nameplate to eliminate confusion among potential customers.

“The name describes better what we do,” Lanser said. “We used to have people call and ask if we were the Thunderbird game farm or Thunderbird auto parts.”

The business moved to its current location on Highway 15 in Outagamie County in early 2006. The facility also houses Top Dog Screen Printing and Embroidery, a sister business owned by Lanser and Swanton.

“It’s a great spot between Appleton, Greenville and Hortonville,” Lanser said. “Housing is booming. Businesses are moving into the industrial park. When we moved out here there was nothing.”

The area still has a bit of a rural feel, with Industrial Nameplate’s 14,000-square-foot facility situated next to an active cornfield.

Just one year after moving in, business growth prompted an expansion of the new facility. The company, which has grown to 17 employees, manufactures custom signage and labels using metal, stainless steel, aluminum, polycarbonate, vinyl and plastic.

“Anything you need a label on, we can do it for you,” Lanser said.

For signs and labels that are used outside and exposed to the elements, Industrial Nameplate uses a specialized Metalphoto process.

“The Metalphoto labels last 20 years outside,” Swanton said. “We tend to focus on defense contracts and that’s why the government likes to use our products, because of the durability.”

In addition to Oshkosh Corp., which accounts for a large percentage of Industrial Nameplate’s overall business, other long-standing major customers include Appleton-based Pierce Manufacturing

Inc., which produces custom fire and rescue products, and Seagrave Fire Apparatus of Clintonville, which makes and refurbishes pumper and rescue units, as well as aerial towers.

“Our customers know that they can call one day and we can deliver it the next,” Lanser said. “Pierce has a facility nearby. Same with Oshkosh.”

Industrial Nameplate also produces labels in a variety of languages for Gulfstream Aerospace Corp., a Savannah, Georgia-based company that manufactures and services business jet aircraft.

The company drums up business mainly through word-of-mouth referrals, Lanser said.

“We don’t have a large sales force,” she said.

Industrial Nameplate ships its products all over the United States.

“Our customers are demanding with their lead times,” Swanton said. “But we can deliver product very quickly.”

Industrial Nameplate’s business has been strong and even experienced an increase during the deep recession due to government contracts, including defense deals.

Swanton credited the WMEP and Industrial Nameplate’s management team for successfully leading the company through the ISO certification process.

“I would not have been able to do it on my own,” Swanton said. “It was a very painful process at first. There were tears and I was confused. Jen at the WMEP was very organized. She’d come in every other week and we would go through a set schedule of what we needed to accomplish for the month. She kept me on track. Her expectations of what needed to be done were very clear. Through the whole process she was holding my hand.”



Emotions spilled out when Industrial Nameplate was awarded unconditional ISO 9001:2015 certification.

“I couldn’t help but cry with happiness,” Swanton said. “Our team worked so hard on this. When we passed with flying colors we could say ‘We did it together.’”

Lanser echoed those sentiments.

“Nicole and I are very committed to this business, obviously, but we wouldn’t be anywhere without all of these people that have helped us,” Lanser said. “Everyone had input.”

Lanser and Swanton had high praise for the work of the WMEP, especially Arnold.

“In our company, a quality management system didn’t exist,” Swanton said. “Yes, we knew our products had to be correct, but we don’t have engineers or a quality team. We didn’t have any knowledge of a quality management system at all. We really needed Jen. She had the background knowledge that it took. She’s very experienced, organized, and detailed.”

Industrial Nameplate anticipates working with the WMEP again.

“I still feel like I don’t have all the experience needed to face the many challenges of the manufacturing industry myself,” Swanton said. “If I were to run across anything in the future, the WMEP would be the first one I would go to.”

