



# Chloride Zinc Plating is Jobshop's Specialty; Educating Customers Firms Relationships

*In Kenosha, WI (population 83,000), there is only one plating shop—Finishing and Plating Services, Inc. A family-owned business started in 1952, the jobshop grew and diversified its services. With the onset of increasingly stringent environmental regulations, the managers began to streamline the services offered, eliminating those that were more problematic from a compliance standpoint. With chloride zinc plating now as the specialty and the appliance and automotive industries as its main clients, the managers have found that business is still growing, a fact they attribute to working with their customers and keeping them educated regarding alternative finishes and corrosion protection.*

**T**he surface finishing industry has changed dramatically, especially in the past 15 years. Brothers Tom Laken, president, and Bruce Laken, vice president, who manage Finishing and Plating Services (FPS), the jobshop founded by their father in 1952, have monitored the changes carefully and adapted their services accordingly. This philosophy has been successful, because their company has seen a 35 percent increase in sales per year over the last five years.

The new plant, which opened for business in 1991, has been designed for efficient finishing operations, with maximum consideration for worker safety and health (high ceilings, good lighting, extensive ductwork, good air movement). This is a view of one of the return-type automatics from the second-story storage area that overlooks the processing department.



As Tom explains, "We've noticed tremendous change in the plating industry, especially in view of environmental controls. Most shops have had to specialize to be competitive, and that has worked well for us. When our father started this business in 1952, he, like most everyone else in the business, added processes in response to customer demand. First, hard chromium, then black oxide, then another, and on and on in order to accommodate customers and keep their business."

That all changed in the '70s," Tom continues, "when the industry was first hit with environmental issues. We had to look at the entire cost of maintaining a process (waste treatment and hazardous waste disposal add to the cost) in order to justify what we were doing. We now specialize in chloride zinc plating, which generates a non-hazardous waste.

If a customer asks us for a finish we no longer provide, we send him to a shop that offers it."

In addition to zinc rack and barrel operations, the company provides other services, such as tin barrel plating, zinc phosphate (barrel), deburring, chemical washing, cleaning, pickling, passivating stainless steel, bright dipping of aluminum and brass, and a variety of post treatments (chromating, waxes, Iridite and oils).

Educating customers has also been important, along with the streamlining. As Bruce says, "Our customers as a rule no longer come in and dictate a finish. Now they are interested in alternative finishes. They want performance in a finish, but want environmental and cost concerns dealt with, too. We make it a point to keep our customers informed on such things as post-treatments for increased corrosion protection, for example."

## Just-in-time Service

Clients have other wants, too, such as suppliers of finishes who can help them with just-in-time delivery. Although the Laken brothers estimate that 80 percent of their business is 24-hr turnaround service, FPS has more than 20 customers in the automotive industry, which banks heavily on just-in-time production. In order to



View from the production manager's office: Big windows help the manager keep an eye on the finishing lines while doing the necessary paperwork in a client office environment.



The ultra-modern plating facility offers just-in-time delivery service that appeals to its appliance and automotive industry customers. Workers are unranking neck rings for home garbage disposal units that have just been finished on one of the shop's four return-type automatic machines.

accommodate them, an additional 4,000 ft<sup>2</sup> was added as warehouse space. As a result, when the shop can get ahead in production, the parts can be stored under ideal conditions until the client's just-in-time delivery schedule calls for them.

Another relatively recent change in the industry is the advent of ISO certification. "In the old days, plating shops dealt primarily with thickness requirements," says Bruce. "Today, many of our large customers are ISO-certified. As subcontractors to them, we are approved sources. That means we've gone through some pretty tough, full-blown audits of practices. We maintain the ISO manuals to meet the needs of these customers."

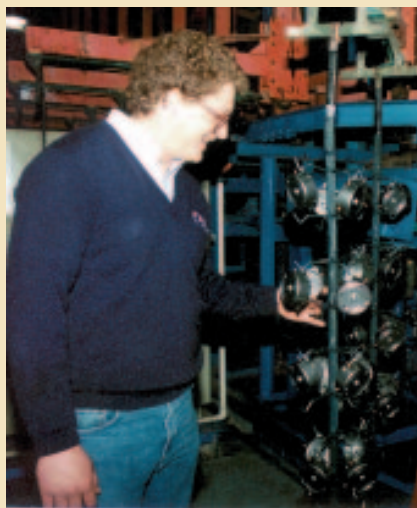
### State-of-the-Art Facility

The location of Finishing & Plating Services has proven ideal for business, especially because FPS is the only plating facility in Kenosha, WI—halfway between Chicago and Milwaukee. The Lakens say that approximately 90 percent of their business comes from within a 50-mile radius. While the appliance and automotive industries provide the company with the majority of its customers, they consider their business as a "mid-range" plating shop. Some of the items finished by FPS include mop handles and other components, casters, medical instruments, parts for hydraulic equipment, and small-engine components. Steel mills ship directly to the plant.

In 1991, the company invested \$4 million in the future of its customers,

employees and the environment when it relocated to a new building in a state-of-the-art industrial park. The community of Kenosha works with business to keep it in the area. Business property is attractively priced to encourage business. As a result of its pro-business image, Kenosha is enjoying a "boom."

The Lakens had their new building designed and built in a record-



Chloride zinc plating is the top specialty at FPS, and is used on a variety of parts, such as casters, parts for hydraulic equipment and small-engine components. Bruce Laken, vice president, takes a close look at some parts as they come off the processing line.

breaking 120 days, seeking out their own suppliers. All former equipment was replaced. The old building was closed on a Friday, and the doors to the new building were opened to business the following Monday. The

rural location provides a pleasant setting for the attractive, well-designed structure. One well-appreciated aspect of the industrial park is that the vandalism that usually accompanies urban shop locations is virtually non-existent. Environmental concerns and energy usage were major considerations in the design of the new plant. Waste streams are "gravity-flowed" to the central

treatment area. The building is made of precast concrete, with R-50 roofs and R-30 walls to hold energy and maintenance costs down. The property on which the shop is located includes an additional four acres for future expansion. When the decision is made to add on, the building's exterior precast panels can be "popped out," making expansion a relatively easy process.

The new jobshop facility includes:

- Four return-type automatic plating lines;
- A custom-designed waste treatment facility that exceeds local, state and federal requirements;
- A warehouse, docks and modern material-handling equipment;
- Laboratory control and certification;
- Enclosed trucks for pick-up and delivery.

Finishing & Plating Services has 40 employees working three shifts, 24 hr/day. Maintenance on equipment is done on weekends. Because the plant is an innovative, clean facility with many features for efficiency of operation, Tom and Bruce report that they've welcomed many visitors. The two believe in the importance of their professional association ties. Tom is the member representative for the company in the National Association of Metal Finishers (NAMF), and Bruce is active in the AESF Milwaukee Branch. This diversification of professional duties helps them efficiently keep up-to-date on business survival practices and educational aspects, such as training in ergonomics, and health and safety.

"There is more of an open door policy today in the relationship between shops and organizations such as the NAMF and the AESF," says Bruce. "So many things, such as the type of cleaners one used, were once secret information. Cooperation within the industry is so much better today, and this is a positive change." □