



Building a business advantage

Successful manufacturer attracts five applicants per day with help of new building

What do you do after selling your booming industrial business to Berkshire Hathaway? Well, if you're Tom Miller and his children, Chad, Michael and Matt Miller and Jennifer Sage, you get to work building up another company.

For 30 years, the Millers' efforts centered on a custom air handling and hydronics manufacturer just outside of Flint, Michigan. In 2014, the family bought out metalworking and welding company Performance Fabricating. At the time, they planned to apply the same approach they used with their first entrepreneurial endeavor: provide premium quality products and treat employees like family.

With the purchase of the business, the Millers also acquired its 20,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in nearby Fenton, Michigan. But to achieve the amount and type of growth the Millers sought, and to attract the talent needed to fuel the growth, it became clear the business needed a new headquarters.

"Aesthetics is everything," said Chad Miller, owner of Performance Fabricating. "When our customers come to see how the product is made, the first thing they see is the building. We wanted a bright, well-lit, good working environment for our team and to demonstrate to our customers the level of quality they'll get by working with us."

The Millers paired with Kevin Johnson and his firm Rhoads & Johnson, a Butler Builder®, to create the building that would help build their business. As another local, long-standing family-owned operation, Rhoads & Johnson offers an in-depth understanding of the Fenton business climate and how building design decisions can impact company success. From the beginning, it was a trusted collaboration.

(Above) Chad Miller and his family are changing the face of the steel industry with a new bright and clean manufacturing and office space.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN JOHNSON

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PERFORMANCE
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“When Kevin does work for you, he puts his heart and soul in it, and you can see it in everything Kevin does,” Chad Miller said.

As a Butler Builder, Rhoads & Johnson also provides best-in-class materials, so the building meets the needs of a top-tier manufacturer.

Manufacturing muscle

First and foremost, to deliver on the Millers’ business plan, the building needed enough muscle to handle the company’s massive outputs. Performance Fabricating supplies major automotive companies and others with metal products such as steel platforms, mezzanines, stairs, handrails and automation conveyors. To be effective, the manufacturing space must accommodate 65 tons of high-bay cranes, which allow technicians to easily assemble these large pieces of equipment and fulfill customer requests for custom extra-large products when their competitors can’t.

“Nobody in the area has a facility like this with 80-foot bays and 10-ton cranes,” Chad Miller said. “We then have 23 to 26 feet underneath our cranes. It’s what sets us apart.”

Another point of differentiation is all Performance Fabricating products are powder-coated. To keep operations efficient, the Millers brought the powder-coating line

in-house in the new facility. They had been shipping products two hours away.

The process includes two 40-by-15-by-15-foot ovens, some of the largest in the area. It was imperative the building design use a minimal number of interior columns to house the large equipment and allow product to be moved through the building with ease.

The Widespan™ structural system was an ideal solution for each of the business’s requirements. As the workhorse of the Butler structural system lineup, it combines the practicality of a rigid frame with virtually unlimited design flexibility. Its modular framing systems are designed to minimize the number of interior columns and are available in widths from 60 to 300 feet with interior modules from 20 to 80 feet. The acrylic-coated, galvanized C/Z structural members add durability and reduce maintenance.

Prioritizing people

At the heart of the Millers’ businesses are their people, and keeping the employees central when making building decisions helps the company attract and retain key talent, despite a manufacturing labor shortage.

“As the automotive industry in this area continues to ramp up, attracting labor is

The manufacturing floor marries features to keep employees healthy, comfortable and productive with the muscle to handle massive customer requests.



a huge issue right now,” explained Kevin Johnson, owner, Rhoads & Johnson. “Having a great place to work is a huge benefit.”

One key element is the building’s curb appeal. Unlike other facilities in the area, the Millers’ new structure features an inviting design and modern office space with a curved exterior wall and high ceilings.

“Not only did the Millers update their building design, but also they’re changing the perception of the industry,” Johnson said. “It starts with the building and the image it conveys.”

The new Performance Fabricating facility certainly speaks to the business’s people-first culture. Unlike traditional welding shops, it is clean and bright. The SunLite Strip® daylighting system from Butler allows natural light to fill the manufacturing space throughout the day, without glares or hot spots. Additionally, thoughtful HVAC design filters the air in the shop to keep clean air flowing throughout the day. The air is warm in the winter and cool in the summer, so employees work at a comfortable 65 to 70 degrees each day.

The Millers also opted for additional features to help keep employees healthy. Employees can sip on reverse-osmosis-filtered drinking water and no longer need to lug large tanks of gas or compressed air to their workstations. Both of these factors help reduce the chances for injury and illness. The manufacturing floor offers hookups for weld gas and compressed air drops throughout.

The layout includes space for employees to relax. The break area features a soda fountain and an 80-inch TV where employees can be found catching a Detroit Tigers game over lunch.



The building helps make the difference. The Millers frequently host potential customers at their new facility to demonstrate the level of quality their products offer.

“People are here a big portion of their day, and they want to enjoy where they are,” Chad Miller explained.

The investment was well worth it. Today about five people a day come in to fill out an employment application.

Optimal operations

Welding is energy-intensive, so the Millers focused on maximizing efficiency everywhere they could. The full building features LED lighting controlled by motion sensors. Additionally, the Butler Thermawall™ wall system ensures the energy spent heating and cooling the 106,000-square-foot building does not go to waste. This factory-insulated wall panel can feature up to 4 inches of foam insulation to achieve an R-value up to R-29. The SunLite Strip daylighting system also provides significant energy savings by reducing the amount of light needed to illuminate the building throughout the day.

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TECHNOLOGY MAKES INTEGRATION EASY

Butler is known for quality building products, but it’s the quality of the engineering and design process that stands out to the team at Asselin McLane Architectural Group. Having early access to a BIM model, directly from Butler, aided the architectural team in designing everything else as it related to the Butler building. This ultimately contributed to plan accuracy while speeding up the design process. It was especially helpful when designing the Millers’ new building, as it seamlessly marries a Butler systems solution with a conventional building.

The SunLite Strip® daylighting system not only offers benefits for the occupants, crews were able to work on the building interior without additional lighting during construction.



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Built for the future

Instead of focusing solely on construction costs when making building-design decisions, the Millers kept their future needs in mind.

“A lot of times people just look at the overall cost of the building, and sometimes just going a little bit larger is not as much money during construction as it would be after,” Chad Miller said. “You’re better off doing it now than planning to add on later.”

With this approach, the Millers decided to bump up their facility footprint. Additionally, their building’s structural and wall systems will help minimize costs should it need to be expanded later. A benefit of Butler building systems is how they can be expanded with ease.

Speed to market

Because the Millers’ ability to grow their new business centered on the new facility, getting the building up and running as quickly as possible was crucial.

“We put the footing in the ground in February, and we moved into the shop in August,” Chad Miller said. “That’s not messing around. Kevin has good subs, good suppliers, and when he

asks them to do something, they do it, and they move fast. To have us in the shop in six months or just under was great.”

Together, the Millers and Rhoads & Johnson, along with architect John Asselin Jr. of Asselin, Mclane Architectural Group, created a place that is not only changing the face of an industry, but changing a community as well.

In the six months after the project was completed, the business added more than 60 jobs, nearly tripling in size. “This is the largest building in the Fenton township,” Chad Miller said. “I’m proud to bring this work to this area for these people. It’s good for our township. It’s good for Fenton. It’s good for this area.” ▲

PERFORMANCE FABRICATING

Butler Builder®: Rhoads & Johnson

Architect: Asselin Mclane Architectural Group

Size: 106,000 square feet

Butler® Building Systems: Widespan™ structural system, MR-24® roof system, SunLite Strip® daylighting system, Butler Thermawall™ wall system