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## Making laser technology work

By Russ Olexa

### **Without good employees and consistent processes, even the best lasers won't run at optimum productivity**

Don Begneaud, founder of Begneaud Mfg., has an impressive array of 10 lasers that do everything from 2-D flat work to 3-D cutting and welding, along with tube cutting and marking/etching operations.

Don Begneaud believes that technology is important, but more than that, he believes in his employees. Because without good people, he says, "The technology doesn't work."

Besides the lasers, the company has a wide range of press brakes, punches, welding systems, finishing equipment and CNC machine tools to aid in any type of fabricating service.

Don Begneaud's relationship with the metal forming and fabricating industry began at age 14 when he started welding metal sculptures and selling them at art shows in his home state of Louisiana. To further his welding knowledge, he took shop courses in high school and went on to major in industrial technology at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. Between semesters he took contract jobs welding from the back of his truck.

In 1978, Begneaud found a market for his work in the expanding oil industry in the United States, so he opened Begneaud Mfg. Not wanting to turn down any work during school, he entrusted his shop on wheels to his first employee and rode his bike to class. Soon the business began consuming most of his time.

What started out as a simple, one-man operation has developed into what is now a 100,000-sq.-ft. precision sheet-metal contract shop that caters to a wide variety of industries.

Begneaud has been recognized multiple times for his work, including the receipt of the 1995 Small Business Award Runner-Up, the 1996 Lantern Award and the 1999 Blue Chip Award. In 2002, Don Begneaud was named as one of The Times Faces to Watch, and in 2003 he and the company received the Fabricators and Manufacturers Award of Excellence.

### **Punching pushes capabilities**

One of the company's first purchases was a Trumpf Minimatic punch, leading it to gain additional work from its current customers, as well as opening doors for work from new ones. With the fabrication shop still trying to pay off the punch press, Don Begneaud knew that expanding the business would require a laser.

Currently Begneaud has one small YAG laser for welding intricate parts using a microscope, two YAG lasers for etching, Trumpf 2530, 3030, and 3050 flat-bed models, a Tubematic, a Trumpf 1005 and a Trumpf 6000L combination punch-laser along with a five-axis Trumpf TLC1005 laser. With the TLC1005 multi-axis laser, the company can cut bevels in pipe, and the full-movement articulating head cuts countersunk holes in square or round tubing.

At first, Begneaud did not have the work to support the purchase of machines, but he says, "I bought the machines and then the work came."

The Trumpf lasers found throughout Begneaud hold a +/-0.004-in. tolerance and can cut maximum thicknesses of 0.5-in. aluminum, 0.75-in. stainless steel and 1-in. carbon steel. Begneaud is capable of bending up to 0.75-in. thick steel stock. The finishing department uses Buffering Steelmaster deburring machines to assist with processing the parts. These machines help reduce the man-hours for deburring.

In the early years the Begneaud customer base was predominately oil-field related. Today this is changing. Begneaud has branched out into the medical components market. "We've had different people

approach us to work with them on medical devices, although it has not been in big numbers," Don Begneaud says. "It's been exciting to do this work. Additionally we've done both aerospace and non-aerospace work for Lockheed Martin and other interesting stuff such as truck parts for Freightliner, automobile components for passenger vehicles and a bit of military defense work."

### **Continuing success**

With expansions and growth, Begneaud has proved itself a successful company--a place where people want to work. But as Don Begneaud notes, "Running a company is much more than worrying about where the next job is coming from. It's how you treat your people, and then how they treat the job, customer and supplier."

He remarks, "In order for us to be successful I think that it's very important that everybody is a team player. As we serve our customers and help them to become more successful, we succeed. The byproduct of our success is profitability. But it's not the most important thing we review. I have heard that there are national surveys which rank monetary compensation No. 6 when employees are requested to rate what they consider important at work. The most important thing for people is receiving recognition for their accomplishments. Recognition gives people drive. That's what we try to do, recognize our people for their talents and performance."

Don Begneaud's daily goal is to fulfill this basic employee need. He adds, "As things evolved here, I came to a better understanding of the need for people to be recognized for their achievements."

The company does this through a program called Character First. Employees receive monthly bulletins and videotapes that introduce a different character trait each month. During weekly meetings, the company recognizes individuals for their accomplishments. Don Begneaud says it's "very important and it builds camaraderie."

He adds, "As we continue to build camaraderie, the culture evolves into this really fantastic place, and I'm happy, because we're starting to attract more and more people who want to join the team. In fact, I just recently had a retired industrial arts teacher request to come over here and help us with our training, for free, because he's been so impressed with the things that we've done with the community." The company considers community service an important part of its work.

As part of this community commitment, Begneaud worked with an area designer to design lightweight, durable arches and kiosks to enhance the look of Festival International de Louisiane in Lafayette. The festival welcomes French descendants from around the world. The arches act as entranceways into the two portions of the festival, and the kiosks are informational signs.

Don Begneaud adds, "We educate the community by hosting site tours for any organization interested in learning more about the sheet-metal processing industry. We also publish a newsletter, The Innovator." With so many projects in the works, this is a company that has come a long way from its humble beginnings. **FFJ**

### **Laser lens experimentation**

*A product that has helped Begneaud keep its lasers up and running longer with greater productivity is a lens from Ophir called Black Magic.*

*Before the company tried Ophir's Black Magic it was using an OEM-quality yellow lens. "The yellow lens would get impregnated with tiny little dots; once those heated up and cooked on, we were done," says Mark Faul, Begneaud's laser team leader.*

*Faul received a Black Magic lens from Ophir's Marketing Manager Dianne Devereaux-Michael to experiment with. He says, "It looked like a mirror, because it was very reflective, but I thought we'd give it a shot. The first one we used lasted almost nine months, even cutting 0.060-in. aluminum to 0.5-in. steel on the same machine."*

*There is a price difference between using a Black Magic and a standard yellow lens. But Devereaux-Michael says, "If you look at the value for the number of hours you get on a yellow lens, compared to the number of hours you get with the Black Magic, the cost difference makes the Black Magic less expensive."*

*Faul adds, "The Black Magic made a big difference in cut quality, speed and ease of cleaning. If we did get a spot on it, it would come off easily. We were impressed with it. Now the Black Magic is all we use."*