



NATHAN JOHNSON/P&D

Employees of Dakota Trailer Manufacturing in Yankton work to complete an aluminum trailer. The company has expanded rapidly since 2005 and finished a 40,000-square-foot expansion in 2011.

Dakota Trailer Finds Winning Combination

Yankton Company Finds A Successful Mix Of Agricultural Need And Manufacturing Capability

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Dakota Trailer Manufacturing, Inc., is an example of how agriculture and manufacturing can intersect and create a successful business.

"The ag industry is driving a lot of our market," said Brian Strahl, who owns the Yankton business along with Ken Karolevitz, Jackie Smith and Lee Orth.

The company was established at Yankton in 1968 as Hawkeye Eagle Grain Trailers. In 2005, it was renamed Dakota Trailer Manufacturing.

During that initial year, the firm built 108 trailers with eight employees. It now builds more than 500 trailers a year with approxi-

mately 150 employees.

In July 2011, Gov. Dennis Daugaard helped Dakota Trailer celebrate the completion of 40,000-square-foot expansion along Gehl Drive.

"We added 40,000 square feet of manufacturing space," Strahl said. "I think a lot of people thought we were just building a new building and getting rid of our old one. What it's allowed us to do is pursue a market on belly dump trailers that we never had before. We've got some other designs that are going to be construction-material related, but we're basically going to start filling in more of the production time on this plant. The old plant (also on the east side of Yankton) will still be for grain hopper trailers."

Dakota Trailer also contracts services to L&M Radiator in Yankton, which has helped both firms grow. Employees of Dakota Trailer work at the L&M facility, and Strahl estimates that collaboration has accounted for about 20 percent of his firms business in each of the last five years.

"They needed a metal fabricator and it helped us," Strahl said. "As far as we're concerned, local economic development officials hit a home run when they built the industrial spec building that attracted L&M Radiator."

While Dakota Trailer's owners are proud to have a successful business, it makes it all the more meaningful they were able to do it in Yankton.

"I love this town," Strahl said. "I love the fishing, the hunting. I like that my kids play sports at Yankton High where I graduated. (My partners) have a lot of the same thoughts."

One of the things that has helped the company thrive is the educational opportunities offered through the Regional Technical Education Center (RTEC).

"The RTEC welding program has been a great training method," Strahl said. "Students go through that class and come out knowing a lot of the basics. We have a lot of success with those graduates."

Speaking in August, company officials were concerned about the effect the widespread drought would have on the sale of its grain hopper trailers.

"In the fall, our local sales will be hurt drastically by the drought," Strahl predicted. "Luckily, we're spread out enough that we're in some areas that don't have as much drought."

Whatever setbacks may come, company officials plan to continue providing the exceptional performance and service they like to call "Dakota pride."

RTEC PROGRAMS, ACTIVITIES ARE 'BUILDING SKILLS FOR TOMORROW'

Since the Regional Technical Education Center (RTEC) was incorporated in October of 2004, we have promoted the importance of home growing Yankton's workforce. During that time, we have partnered with Southeast Job Link, Black Hills State University, Mitchell Technical Institute, the South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation and other entities to sponsor job fairs, training programs and activities so students of all ages can realize the importance of building skills for tomorrow.

We have created hands-on learning experiences at our annual Career Expos held each April. We have offered two-week Manufacturing Academies in the summer to give high school students a taste of the real world of manufacturing.

New opportunities keep arriving. Thanks to funding from local manufacturers, several organizations, and a Community Development Block Fund Grant, RTEC was able to purchase new equipment and a trailer so we can expand our training opportunities.

We unveiled some of the new equipment in August when we sponsored Virtual Welding Games with our new virtual reality welding simulator. More will be showcased in a few short weeks when RTEC launches a competitive First® LEGO® League team.

We're proud to call Yankton home and we can't wait to see what the future holds. We hope you'll contact RTEC when you're ready to start building your skills for tomorrow.



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