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CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

IS TAKING THIS COMPANY INTO THE FUTURE

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Written by Robert Hoshowsky

To succeed in business for over a century takes determination, vision, skill, and the attitude to make it through tough times, which perfectly describes the metal products group Banner Metals. Founded in 1921 as the Banner Die, Tool, and Stamping Company, the company has experienced the highs and lows of all the decades since, yet continues to grow.

“Holding to its values of quality, dependability, and integrity to all customers throughout the pandemic, Banner Metals Group also remained loyal to its employees, choosing not to lay off any of its team.”

“There have been a lot of struggles over 100 years, and COVID was just one of many,” says President and Chief Executive Officer Bronson Jones, commenting on how the company went ahead with its anniversary celebrations in 2021.

“We’ve gone through World Wars, significant downturns in the economy, 9/11, and all kinds of things that challenged the business, including COVID,” he says. “We’ve proven [our

resilience] for more than a century. I remind everybody we’ve been here 100 years, and there will be more obstacles. We just have to understand that and continue moving forward.”

Holding to its values of quality, dependability, and integrity to all customers throughout the pandemic, Banner also remained loyal to its employees, choosing not to lay off any of its team. Jones firmly believed business would come back, and it has. Today, one of the company’s biggest challenges is finding additional staff to keep up with marketplace demand.

Along with reaching out to trade schools, conducting LinkedIn searches, and investigating recruiting services, Banner is offering referral bonuses to employees, increased wages for starting and current workers, and flexible work schedules. The ideal candidates are people who have a positive attitude and a willingness to work and are accustomed to following policies and procedures.

“You’ve got to think outside the box, and sometimes bring people in with lesser skill sets and train them, and that’s what we’ve been doing,” says Jones, who has spent the past decade building and maintaining the Banner company culture. “We haven’t dropped our standards, and I will not have someone come in who doesn’t represent our values.” ▶▶



► The Banner Difference

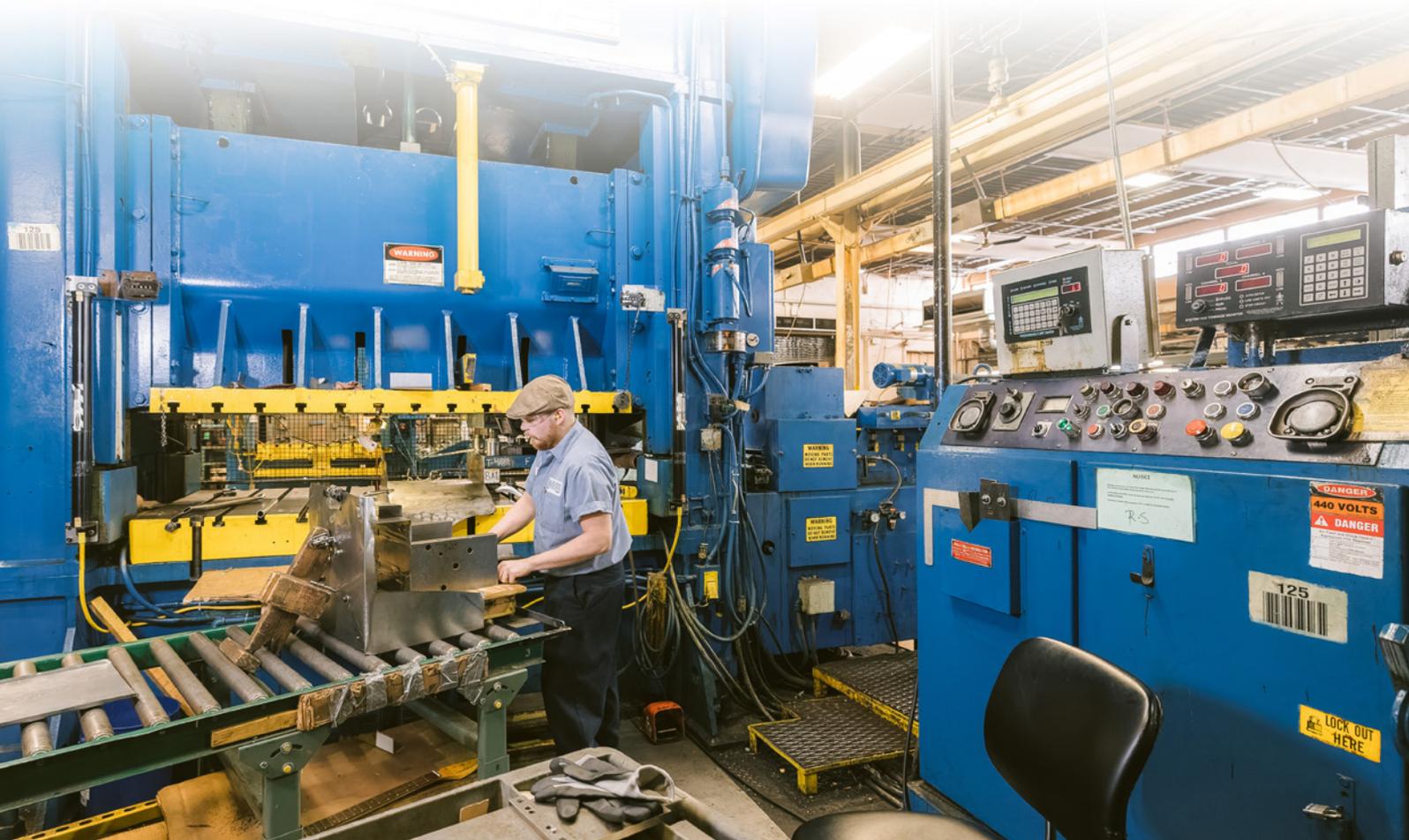
First created as a full-service metal stamping company, Banner has expanded its services to include fabrication, CNC machining, welding, engineering, and laser cutting. Known for its years of experience in heat treatment, tool and die design and maintenance, project management, packaging, and other areas, Banner continues to find ways to set itself apart from others in the industry.

This includes the company's ISO 9000/AS9100 certifications, ITAR Registration, commitment to continuous improvement, and robust Quality Management System, which the company proudly states "is more than just a standard, it's a culture ingrained into our daily routine." Combined, these are some of the factors that make up The Banner Difference.



Championing continuous improvement—the cornerstone of the company's foundation—is a Six Sigma Master Black Belt on Banner's Leadership Team. Six different actions comprise The Banner Difference: Discover, Consult, Plan, Produce, Serve, and Care.

The first step, Discover, comes in when company representatives first meet with potential customers. "That's when I learn a little bit about you, you learn about Banner, we find out your needs and concerns, and from there, we gain clarity: is there a fit or not?" says Jones. "We don't just come in and try to tell you something; we don't sell anything. Instead, we consult and discover first, to make sure it is worth both parties' time."





Next comes Consult. This takes place when the client communicates the kind of product they have in mind for production. A quote is drawn up and a review initiated to ensure the design is exactly what the customer wants. This phase sees Banner ask exhaustive questions and come up with valuable solutions wherever possible. Sometimes, there are alternative ways to process the job, or clients may not actually need as much as first envisaged.

“If we tell you we are going to deliver on a certain date, you can guarantee it’s going to be delivered on that day.”

Once the client is engaged, then comes the Plan. Before any product production, Banner conducts a Risk 360 analysis. This sees the company look at all the risks involved in processing, from material flow to tool build, capacity to internal needs.

Risks are identified during planning and before product launch, which involves plenty of back-and-forth communication. Banner also looks at its own internal risks, time frames, and other ramifications. The company, with its experience and its experts, is also involved in project management and supplier development, questioning if customers have their own suppliers and whether Banner’s own suppliers are ready.

Once the Plan is successful, the company and client move on to Produce. This sees the Banner team check and verify its own

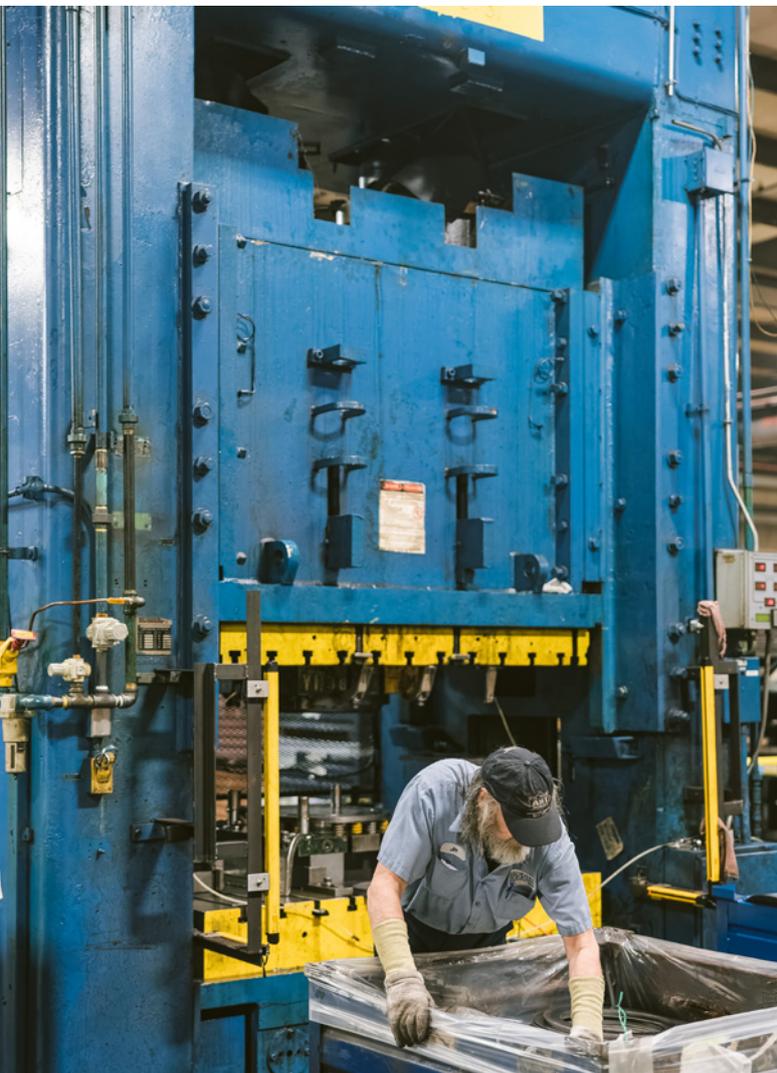
manufacturing resources for the job—its ability to produce the specific products to satisfy client requirements and inventory management. “So, we’ll produce a month’s worth of product, or a year’s worth of product, and supply it to you monthly so you have just-in-time delivery,” Jones explains.

Next up in the process is Serve. This includes real-time communications with customers by whichever means they prefer, be it Zoom, fax, phone, or text. “Whatever it is, we adapt to your methods, and we are available 24/7,” says Jones. “There’s always someone you can call. And this includes accountability and trust. If we tell you we are going to deliver on a certain date, you can guarantee it’s going to be delivered on that day.”

The last piece of The Banner Difference is the most important: Care. This takes the form of what the company calls care reviews. “We have an initial discovery, but then we have a monthly, quarterly, or bi-monthly care review where we sit down with you and ask what we are doing well and not so well.”

These care reviews see Banner’s Quality Managers meet with their counterparts on the customer side, along with individuals from purchasing and engineering. A valuable stage, this process allows the company to hear information from people they may not speak to regularly, and gain collective intelligence.

This helps the team better serve all customers, whom Jones prefers to call partners, many of them long-term. One aerospace partner is proud to have worked with Banner for the past 78 years. ▶



► Long-term and new clients

Before becoming CEO and president a decade ago, Jones spent years with Banner in roles including receiving inspector, quality assurance manager, plant manager, general manager, and vice president. A visionary, hands-on executive, he is frequently on the shop floor interacting with employees, getting feedback, and coming up with ideas for growth.

At the time he took over his current role, Banner was a North American supplier, but before long, Jones had earned the company new business from customers in France, Morocco, Malaysia, Poland, Canada, and Mexico. "I'm a visionary, so that's my role," he says. "We look to the future, project where we need to go, and see what the best fit is."

While maintaining traditional markets including automotive, commercial truck and off-highway, lawn and garden, and aerospace, Jones is actively pursuing new sectors. Experiencing an increase in aerospace business following the pandemic, Banner is seeing plenty of interest in electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL). A promising emerging market, eVTOL will include drone air taxis, which will eventually be autonomous.

One manufacturer—which has teamed up with Toyota—is building a facility in Dayton, Ohio, about an hour and a half from Banner.

Combining high-volume automobile manufacturing with slower aircraft build will result in aircraft specifications in high-volume applications. This is a perfect fit for Banner, which already supplies high-volume to automobile manufacturers and low/mid-volume to aircraft manufacturers.

Actively following this new market through the Vertical Flight Society (VFS) and other associations, it has been reported that air taxis will be used next year during the Olympics in Paris to get back and forth from the airport to the Olympic site.

"It's going to change the way you and I commute," says Jones of eVTOL technology, including the ability to fly at 300 miles an hour (482 km/h) to a destination. "We've seen a lot of interest in that market. We are an aircraft company, we have all the aircraft certifications, but we also can produce high-volume aircraft products."

Staying safe for the future

With a safety record second to none, the company, Jones says, prefers to call it Environmental Health and Safety (EH&S) rather than a safety program. Chaired by a former Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) employee, Banner's employee-led EH&S program is rigorous, and required for all employees.

Specific jobs, such as forklift, crane, and production operator, also have separate licensing certifications. Safety checklists are reviewed daily. Everything is light-curtained and checked through sensors. Along with annual hearing and vision tests, all new hires are also checked for color blindness to ensure they can distinguish between green and red lights. Additionally, Banner provides prescription safety glasses, safety shoes, and uniforms, which are made from different materials depending on the tasks at hand.

At Banner, safety is monitored and reported once a month. In 2020, the company's OSHA Days Away, Restricted or Transferred (DART) rate—used to measure recordable incidents—was zero in 2020, 2021, and 2022. In 2023, it was 3.4. after a worker suffered a pinched finger, returning to work just days later.

"That means for a company our size, we had *one* lost-time incident," says Jones. "Before 2023, we went over 850 days without a lost-time incident, and I was very proud of that. We have a board out front that says how many days we've gone without a lost-time incident. I preach safety out there, and it's the number one thing: safety, quality, production. Production is third; output is third. We are not piecemeal here."

Unlike suit-and-tie CEOs, Jones' regular attire is a shop uniform and steel-toed boots. "Even though I'm the CEO, I don't play the role. When I'm out on the floor, I know everybody by name, and I'm helping wherever I can. That's how I manage. I don't manage like the CEO who doesn't come out on the floor and doesn't know anybody. That's not me in any way, shape, or form."

Growing independence

Jones' vision is to reduce Banner's dependence on outside work by creating its own in-house tool and die build shop. Recently, the business invested \$400,000 in two new CNC mills for production machining. This started as a value-add to Banner but is now turning into a sizable chunk of business.

"I plan to invest in more CNC equipment in our tool room and upgrade our tool room to build tools and dies internally because I'm tired of relying on outside companies to build our dies," he says. One reason is COVID, which saw lead times to build a new tool increase from about 26 to 56 weeks. The other reason is the drastic increase in the price of steel and tools. By building tools in-house, Banner can pass on lower costs to customers, and increase its metal stamping business.

With a staff of 38, Banner is looking for four to five more employees so the company can open its second shift and run parts 20 hours a day. With a 75,000 square foot facility, the company has ample room to expand, including space for three or four more CNC machines in the coming years.

"In addition to the tool room, we have more machining business coming that we're going to be looking at," Jones says. "So we're going to be investing not only in CNC machining but also automation coming around 2025. Some of this [work] is just repetitive part placing, where a co-bot would work better." (For more on this, check out ***The Automation Question – Is the Robot Revolution at a Crossroads?*** in this issue.)

Indeed, Jones believes Artificial Intelligence will benefit the company and its existing workers, freeing them up for more skilled tasks. "I'm sure down the road, AI will be part of our business," he says. "You're either going to watch the ship sail, or you're going to be on the ship." ■

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