

**MAKING IT
IN NORTHERN
MICHIGAN**

BROUGHT TO YOU BY:



Who knew they made it here?

BY CLARK MILLER

After oilfield work in northern Michigan flatlined, Don Basch decided to earn a mechanical engineering associate's degree at Northwestern Michigan College (NMC). He



worked for a while at an engineering firm, but in 1999 he got the entrepreneurial itch.

Photodon, the screen protection company he started with his wife, Jeanette, was strictly a home business at first.

"We started out making computer monitor hoods," he said. "We would hand cut them in our basement, then have them all over our living room and on our dining room table."

Things have changed dramatically since then.

Photodon now has 10 full-time employees and an expanded product line that includes screen protectors for drone cameras, cell phones, medical devices and televisions as well as a customized microfiber material used to protect U.S. Air Force pilots' helmet lenses from being scratched.

New products have helped attract a client list that includes Sony, HP, Apple, the FBI, the U.S. Census Bureau and numerous overseas companies.

Mandy Peterson, the Basch's daughter, is the office manager at Photodon.

Her Photodon elevator speech goes as fol-

lows: "We specialize in ways to protect, improve and provide privacy of your screen viewing experience."

Best Practices

Photodon earned its first million in annual sales in 2013.

To find – and retain – good employees, the company offers medical and optical benefits, a simple IRA match, quarterly bonuses and paid vacation. Petersen said employees rarely have to work on weekends.

Employee Feedback

Drew Denison, an accounting assistant at Photodon, listed other reasons why employees say it's a good place to work.

"When a person needs some extra time off, or random personal events come up, it's no problem to get covered," he said.

That flexibility, he explained, is made possible because employees cross-train.

Denison said Photodon's workers enjoy a high degree of autonomy because they "are well-trained and have good time management software tools that help us stay focused without having to be supervised closely."

There's also the continuing education. "[The continuing ed is] at least one hour ... per month," Denison said. "We can also take [business-related] classes in the community to fulfill our education requirement."

He also praised the company's attitude

toward mistakes.

"When we make mistakes here, we are not punished or made fun of," he said. "We are expected to learn and make our processes better."

Dependable Supply Chain

Almost all the basic materials Photodon turns into finished products come from South Korea and, to a lesser degree, Taiwan. To avoid interruptions in supply, the company warehouses extra inventory of raw materials.

Expanding (and Diversifying) the Customer Base

The majority of Photodon's online sales come through purchase orders from larger companies. About half of sales are from repeat customers. In addition, the company sells online through Amazon (roughly 15 percent of sales) and has recently started selling via Walmart (at this point, less than five percent of sales).

The wisdom of selling online – and having international sales – became apparent when Photodon grew during the recession of 2007-2009. In fact, Photodon has now outgrown the space it took over in 2010 at 2682 Garfield Road North. Peterson said she is searching for larger building with a clean



room. More space, she said, would allow the company to buy new equipment and possibly hire a few new employees.

Implementing Best Practices

Peterson carefully monitors new materials from vendors and brainstorming ways those items might help Photodon meet evolving customer needs. She has taken lean office and lean manufacturing courses at NMC and plans to sign up a couple of employees for similar training.

She said Photodon also keeps its competitive edge by practicing Kaizen rules – Japanese for "good change."

"[Kaizen] means we strive to do it better, make it better and improve even if it's not broken," she said. "That's because if we don't, we can't compete with those who do."