

Tiger Manufacturing connects students with businesses

By Stephen Wiblemo wiblemo@hutchinsonleader.com

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Juniors Jake Albers and Marcus Smahel worked on the mini mills inside Hutchinson High School's career and technical education wing. They are just two students who might be interested in Tiger Manufacturing, a program that would teach kids real-life manufacturing skills by having them run a business out of the school.

Staff photo by Stephen Wiblemo



Brett Haugen, founder of Stamp-n-Storage in Hutchinson, showed off the new card holders Tiger Manufacturing made for him. His customers use them for displaying their paper crafts, and he recently showed them off at a crafting convention. Haugen is one of several sponsors of TigerPath Academies who are using Tiger Manufacturing for jobs they need done. Tiger Manufacturing was able to produce these card holders for Stamp-n-Storage and at a better price than the company could make them itself.

Staff photos by Stephen Wiblemo

For years, Brett Haugen, the owner of Stamp-n-Storage in Hutchinson, wanted to make card holders that his clients can use to display their paper crafts. The problem was the holders cost him more to produce than what he could charge customers.

That changed this spring when Haugen got in touch with Tiger Manufacturing at Hutchinson High School. With its help, he had a batch of card holders economically made in time to show customers at a recent crafting convention.

“Working through the details over the last few weeks, they’ve been very helpful to meet our needs,” Haugen said about Tiger Manufacturing. “They’re even doing all the packaging for us, so we get a turn-key solution from them.”

“We’re anxious to see what (our customers’) response is to it,” Haugen added, “and then we’ll be putting it up on our website for sale on a broader platform.”

Haugen’s story is the kind of feedback proponents of Tiger Manufacturing hope to hear as they continue their plans to bring the program to life.

What is Tiger Manufacturing?

It’s the brainchild of Jeff Smith and Daryl Lundin, a couple of technical education teachers who want to give students the closest experience to real life manufacturing as possible. They, along with Principal Patrick Walsh and Hutchinson Economic Development Authority Director Miles Seppelt, first got the idea after a trip to Eleva-Strum High School in Wisconsin, which has a similar program called Cardinal Manufacturing.

The idea is simple: Using all of the tools and machines in the new career and technical education wing of the high school, students run a small manufacturing business under teacher supervision.

When the program is fully operational, Smith said kids will be in charge of the whole process, from meeting and talking to customers, to making designs, drafting prototypes and reviewing the final products. Students will even be in charge of marketing.

“We want to get a business teacher involved, too, so (students) can do the bookkeeping side of stuff,” Lundin added.

Although the program is not yet to that point — teachers are doing most of the work now — Smith said they’ve spoken to several students who are excited about the prospect.

“Their eyes usually light up and they’d be interested in participating,” Smith said. “It’s just a matter of time and getting it implemented in a professional manner. We don’t just want to throw it out there. We want to have it organized before we implement it.”

One of those interested students is junior Marcus Smahel, who said he is excited about the idea of “being able to make a product and give it to someone and say, “I made this, it’s a quality part.”

“I think it’s pretty cool for us because it’s an opportunity to learn what things are going to be like when we’re out of school and in an actual job setting,” Smahel said.

Products such as the Stamp-n-Storage card holders are exactly the kind of work Smith and Lundin envision for Tiger Manufacturing. It isn’t looking to compete with local manufacturers or mass produce items. The main focus is on teaching students, and helping local businesses find solutions.

“We want to complement local industry,” Smith said, “and help them where we can with small-run things that we can save them some money on, and get some education out of it for the students.”

Smith said Tiger Manufacturing was always one of the long-term goals of TigerPath Academies, a program designed to teach students the skills needed in various career fields. Several local businesses sponsored the TigerPath initiative, such as Stamp-n-Storage, and so far it’s been many of those same donors who have been clients.

“Since the open house we had for our contributors,” Lundin said, “it’s sparked interest with that part of the business community. Now they’re starting to use us.”

Two more big clients Tiger Manufacturing is working with are Mark Schierman and Dan Hart, business partners in the new brewery opening in Hutchinson.

Schierman, who has long been a financial booster to the high school, was also a sponsor of the new technical education wing. He became a fan of Smith and Lundin’s work after purchasing their first tiny house.

As he and Hart have worked to get their new business ready to open, he realized there were many projects Tiger Manufacturing could do for them. After touring the school’s facilities with Hart, both men agreed. So far they’ve used the program to produce several items from custom tap handles and flight carriers, to custom glass etching and park benches.

“Dan and I have all this work going on,” Schierman said, “and we’re like, ‘We could do all kinds of stuff (with Tiger Manufacturing).’ ... So Dan and I went out and saw it, he got to meet Daryl, and the rest is history.”

“When we visited Daryl, it was like, ‘Yeah, I can do that,’ and, ‘Yeah, I can do that,’” Hart said. “And it was like, ‘Dude, you just took six things off the list that were major time consumers for us. And you’re right in our backyard.’”

“Working with them, and them wanting to try new things with the tools they have available, has been awesome,” Hart added. “And the products they turn out have been solid.”

What’s next for Tiger Manufacturing?

Smith and Lundin are optimistic the program will be organized and run by students sometime next school year, but they aren’t going to rush it. They want to make sure they have everything in place for a smooth opening, and plenty of students to run the business.

The way it sounds, though, finding interested students may not be a big deal.

Junior Jake Albers is another student excited about the idea of a student-run manufacturing business. He said he works at Innovative Foam in Hutchinson and recently used the school’s plasma cutter to create casters for wheels on new carts he built at his job. It’s this kind of work, he said, that has him interested in Tiger Manufacturing.

“The problem-solving part of it is fun for me,” Albers said. “My goal is to be an engineer one day, and it’s kind of fun to have somebody say, ‘Hey, we need this,’ and I have to figure out how to do it.”