



A right way to reshore

Pratt reduces exposure to off-shore sourcing with 'ready, willing, and able' U.S. supplier

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The idea of needing to reshore America's manufacturing base would have been a foreign concept to Bob Pratt. It was the mid '70s and America believed its manufacturing preeminence was essentially unassailable. After all, the label: "Made in China" was indicative of cheaply-made, largely disposable goods. Edwards Deming was an unknown name, at least here, and fears that the American automobile and high-tech industries would be overwhelmed by Japan in less than a decade was an unimaginable scenario at the time.

Pratt had previously been employed at an equipment company and during his time there, had invented and patented the first "Twist Lock" device capable of securing intermodal shipping containers to chassis. Years later, armed with his innovative product and an entrepreneurial spirit, he incorporated Pratt Industries in 1974.

We won't debate the whys and wherefores of what has transpired in

the realm of global manufacturing and trade over the ensuing five decades. However, suffice it to say that the supply-chain issues caused by COVID-19 was a wakeup call to many of us in the manufacturing sector.

As chief operating officer for Pratt Industries, I can honestly say that the recent supply-chain crisis not only humbled me personally, but made our management team rethink the way

EMCO 22.5K axle leaf springs at Pratt's facility, ready for installation.

Photo: Pratt

we were doing business and why. The following story highlights one of many ongoing efforts to make our company better, stronger, and more resilient to future challenges and more responsive to the ever-changing global business environment.

What we do

Pratt Industries has been a pioneer in the field of intermodal chassis manufacturing, marked by significant innovations such as the creation of the industry's first 20/40 combo chassis. Invented by Bob Pratt's son, Bill, in 1977, the chassis expands or retracts as necessary in order to accommodate different cargo lengths and is capable



of handling both 20' and 40' intermodal shipping containers.

Today, Pratt is responsible for continuing to decrease weight on chassis. We have the lightest-weight chassis out there at less than 5,000 lbs., with the ability to haul up to 62,000 lbs. We're known for lightweight, durable chassis with the longest lifespans. In fact, we still have some of our original chassis in the field, and recently received a request for replacement parts for one of our 1978 models.

We manufacture tank and container chassis; truss and modular home trailers; gas and energy trailers; heavy-haul, lowboy and gooseneck trailers; EZ ramp utility trailers; flatbed and platform trailers; log and pole trailers; specialty

products; and we also do trailer refurbishment. We can handle high volumes, low volumes, and everything in between.

In addition to air spring suspensions, we use a lot of 22.5K axle leaf springs in our production process. Leaf springs are a very basic, but necessary component of an operational trailer. I can say with experience that you don't generally think about how basic or necessary they are until you can't get one.

A gut punch

Even before the pandemic, the table was set for potential issues. It's no secret that the North American Market for 22.5K axle leaf springs has been dominated by just two key suppliers. Located in

the U.S. and Canada respectively, they have long served large and small customers alike.

Pratt had been a loyal customer of both suppliers for more than 20 years by the time COVID hit. When we all started to pick up the pieces and get moving again, things were different. Though we thought we had a relationship built upon two decades of doing business together, the large suppliers were so busy serving the needs and backlogs of their largest customers that those of us in the middle had to take a back seat, and we weren't very comfortable sitting there.

Necessity made us look for alternative suppliers and caused us to increase our stocking levels, not just of leaf springs, but of supplies of all components. Like many others, we were forced into dual-sourcing of components just to stay safe—and it's really not a viable way to do business.

Pratt also started using an Indonesian-based supplier for its 22.5K leaf springs. The supplier was competent and produced a good product, but as time went on, problems with shipping delays and other logistical issues strained that relationship as well.

Ultimately, there were problems with reliability and consistency. And

Pratt is known for lightweight, durable chassis with long lifespans, such as this 20/40 combo chassis.

Photo: Pratt Industries



With products such as this heavy-haul specialty trailer, Pratt can handle high volumes, low volumes, and everything in between.

Photo: Pratt Industries

for folks like us who pride ourselves on being able to do custom work and volume work—it just wasn't working out. As the supply-chain realities and business climate continued to evolve, Pratt started to consider other options and alternative suppliers that were closer to home. At just about that time, we were approached by a Midwest-based company called EMCO Industries.

Reevaluating and reshoring

When we first engaged in discussions with EMCO, we were just excited to find an alternative domestic supplier of 22.5K axle leaf springs. It turned out that EMCO was already a dominant supplier of leaf springs to light- and medium-duty trailer OEMs, a segment of the industry known for its price competitiveness and demanding culture. We even spoke with some of our OEM contacts in that arena and they assured us that EMCO was the real deal. Finally, we were even more excited to learn that EMCO was fully capable of meeting our volume needs, with capacity to spare.

From the outset, our partnership with EMCO was a breath of fresh air for Pratt. Unlike many previous suppliers, EMCO has excelled in several key areas that are crucial for our operations. First and foremost, they now have a proven track



EMCO engineers and workers reviewing specifications for 22.5K axle leaf springs at one of its Midwest locations.

Photo: EMCO

record with us of product availability and quick order turnaround. This allows us to again operate on a just-in-time delivery model, reducing the need to hold excessive inventory.

Secondly, their service is highly reliable. They consistently do what they say they will do, from taking the order, communicating effectively during the process, producing parts correctly to spec', and shipping them on time. All these are done at a reasonable cost, which is essential for us to maintain our marketplace competitiveness.

Finally, EMCO is highly responsive to our needs, providing end-to-end customer service that ensures our requirements are met. Their procedural integrity is commendable. The entire process, from order placement to delivery, is executed with precision and

professionalism. In short, they are offering the right product, at the right price, and at the right time for our industry.

What's ahead

Pratt Industries has navigated the challenges posed by global supply-chain disruptions and domestic manufacturing limitations by forming strategic partnerships, such as the one with EMCO Industries. As we look forward, EMCO's commitment to innovation, reliability, and domestic supply channel integrity could quite possibly position them as a future leading supplier of 22.5K axle leaf springs to the HD trailer manufacturing industry. As Pratt looks to the future, we'll continue to search for the opportunity to form relationships with companies that are not only on the same page, but on the same continent. **TBB**



Pratt Industries workers install axles on its assembly line.

Photo: Pratt Industries