Marching toward Success One Leg at a Time

By Deborah Nash, MMEC

Entrepreneur Sarah Calhoun of Red Ants Pants LLC, received hurrahs! from 230 conference goers at the recent Compete Smart Manufacturing Conference in Helena after seasoned businessman Bob Ricketts presented her as an example of Montana’s bright future.

“It makes my heart happy to have met a young lady like this taking the initiative to get something started,” he told the audience as he walked to where Calhoun was seated. “This is the new blood of Montana’s economy... This is our future.”

Ricketts, CEO of Doctor Down in Polson, was the delightful, surprise entertainer for the conference closing luncheon. He brought Calhoun to the attention of the audience after meeting her just a short time earlier at a conference session. There she had told him of the grand opening of her specialty garment business in White Sulphur Springs coming up that weekend and shared a bit of her story.

Her business, Red Ants Pants, is the first-ever company dedicated to manufacturing workwear for women — specifically, cotton duck work pants. Opening the business was actually the culmination of two years on a fast learning track for Calhoun, who is no stranger to hard work. She has a long-standing personal awareness that workwear has not been made to fit women as she grew up on a farm in New England and later led trail crews in five states across the U.S., from Maine to California, and peeled logs for extra income. She has also instructed kids in the backcountry while working for Outward Bound. The experiences exacerbated her frustration with poor fitting work pants, which until now have been designed to fit men.

Problem Begets Solution

“The problem with women wearing men’s workpants is that the pants are cut very straight — without any curves whatsoever,” Calhoun explains, “so you have to get a waist size big enough to fit over your hips. And once buttoned, the waist is too big, creating gaps in the back and the dreaded ‘plumbers crack’ when you bend over.”

Poor fit also limits range of motion. Traditional work pants have other shortcomings. Red Ants Pants is fixing that, offering two cuts of work pants, one for women with curves and one for those with a narrow hip but wider waist. Both contain other preferred design elements that, like the name implies, get work done day in and day out without stopping. Calhoun has even defied the traditional single sizing scale used for women’s clothing in favor of a waist/length measuring system — “straight forward and consistent between styles.” And she’s already exploring additional fabric options.

Clothing and Community

A look at the company Web site www.redantspants.com will reveal that Calhoun is not just designing and selling workwear for women but working to create connections and community within the world of working women. Her line is currently manufactured in the USA by a women-owned manufacturing center in Seattle and sold and distributed from her storefront in the small central-Montana town of White Sulphur and through her Web site. There you can learn more about the “Red Ants Challenge” and brand promotion intended to foster fun, community and a sense of camaraderie among wearers and sewers alike.

With assistance from Al Deibert from the Montana Manufacturing Extension Center, she has explored additional in-state sourcing, but hasn’t found contractors with the necessary “spendy” equipment at this time. Deibert also worked with her to understand and make grading (standards used for sizing by the industry) decisions and assisted with cost management, looking at her price/volume

(continued on page 4)
Essence Invites Bright Future

The national news about manufacturing suggests that international trade may have you feeling a bit pessimistic with manufacturing jobs losses continuing in some parts of our country. Jobs and internationalization continue to be hot political topics. Emerson said it better, but where there is chaos, there is opportunity. Manufacturing in Montana has a bright future with its pervasive entrepreneurial and innovative spirit. In Montana, failure is interchangeable with “didn’t try,” and for us, it’s not an option. We start and operate small businesses. And small businesses are the source of economic growth, new jobs, and innovation. Montana is the essence of creativity, innovation, and a can-do spirit! Two exciting things going on at MMEC are poised to fuel that potential. First, we are working to develop and deliver new services well suited for Montana’s entrepreneurial spirit. We are working with the National Institute of Standards and Technology’s (NIST) Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) to identify the best possible process for developing ideas and then turning those ideas into marketable products quickly and cost effectively. Partnerships are being built with experts such as Doug Hall, founder of Eureka! Ranch (http://www.eurekarch.com) and star of ABC’s nationally syndicated American Inventor. Eureka! Ranch is the world leader in applying systemic thinking to business growth planning. Doug is excited to be involved. Let me mention, too, that Doug will be the keynote speaker at Compete Smart 2008, our renowned manufacturing conference.

Second is our “WIRED” project. You have probably heard that Governor Brian Schweitzer applied for, and the US Department of Labor awarded to Montana, a $45 million three-year grant to help develop the bio-products industry in the state’s 32 most rural counties. Through the Montana Department of Commerce, MMEC received nearly $700,000 of the WIRED funds to deve- love a Field Engineer full time to these efforts. This is a super opportunity for MMEC, and for Montana! But it’s only a great beginning. Field engineers and county leaders all continue to be hot political topics.

DIY Wired lays the foundation for a sustainable economy into the future. On that foundation, we believe we can build a real economic opportunity for Montana’s rural areas in this and other industries. There may be a better name for it, but I call it “Distrib- uted Manufacturing.” This isn’t really a new concept. It harkens back to the earlier days of the Industrial Revolu- tion. Maybe “Cotton Gin Manufacturing” would be a better name.

“But every jet of chaos which threat- ens to exterminate us is convertible by intellect into wholesome force.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)

Hiring Smart…The Truth about Turnover

Having trouble finding new hires or keeping the ones you do hire? It may be your hiring prac- tices, according to Steve Wilson, Willow Creek Consultants, Hayden, Montana. He manages government grants Peter Drucker’s observation that he is “the one productive company’s hiring decisions will prove to be mistakes in the first twelve months” and says other studies on traditional hir- ing processes show similar findings. By contrast, “Nearly every business system has seen revolutionary technolog- ical change, yet some still hire employees the way they did 50 years ago.” Wilson points out. “One of the reasons compa- nies don’t change their hiring process is they don’t realize how much their people problems are costing them.”

Wilson and his wife Vicki have 35 years of combined human resource experience. They presented a workshop on “The New Art of Hiring Smart” during the October Compete Smart conference in Helena. As employers and consultants on hiring, the pair have developed an approach that changes the statistics rate for hiring from 55 to 80 percent.

Success is measured in terms of retaining a productive, reliable worker. Some employers think turnover is a great way to keep employ- ment costs down. Not true, says Wilson. Even keeping marginal performers is very costly for a business. And keeping current employees in positions that don’t fit is also counter-productive. He sug- gests re-evaluating their strengths and placing them in more suitable roles.

Sticker Shock

Paying attention to your hiring practices in the first place can eliminate many problems. And while there can be lots of reasons for turnover, understand- ing the true cost is important. Here’s how and why.

“Data from our ‘Turnover Rates in Small Business’ study showed that turnover can range from 59% to 66% in the first year. The cost can be anywhere from $5,000 to $50,000 per employee replaced,” says Wilson. “Just do the math!“

“Cotton Gin Manufactur- ing, changing the foundation of the U.S economy. The cotton gin, a labor- saving device producing cleaned (value- added) cotton, could be scaled to an efficiency and divide by current employees to get a turnover cost of $29,000 to $150,000.”

“An analysis of 35 independent turn- over cost studies (www.sasharp.com/ turnover.html) conservatively calcu- lates that the cost to replace an 8-hour employee is $45,500! And that doesn’t include intangibles like lost customers, goodwill or employee creativity. Wilson says. Multiply that figure by the 10 in the example above, and the cost is huge — $450,000.

“Despite this staggering amount, many companies spend more time on selecting a new computer than they do on select- ing a good employee!” Wilson states.

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Uhl was an Air- man in the U.S. Air Force and has expe- rience in the service department and on the engine/transmis- sion assembly line for BMW in Germany. He also has experience in the financial industry. He recently moved to Bozeman from Maui, Hawaii. Montana Manufacturing Extension Center (MMEC) is an outreach and ap- plied research center in Montana State University’s College of Engineering. MMEC provides direct business and engineering expertise and training to companies and start-ups that are trying to establish or develop new uses for such sustainable bio-products. WIRED will foster a sustainable rural economic cluster and it will also enable Montana to participate in the national strategy to reduce petroleum dependence.
mix and other issues to help her price her product correctly.

“It’s very common for niche manufacturers to undercharge compared to the value they are creating,” Dehert says. Looking at costs and competing niches helps put it into perspective.

**Following Ten-Point Plan**

Asked how she felt being singled out at the conference luncheon, Calhoun said, “It was fantastic. I met Bob at Al’s coffee shop, that fit.

She attended Compete Smart as part of a continuing effort to gain background in business and finance, which she had admitted to being a year self-study that started off with a chance meeting at a local coffee shop where she was reading a book on how to start a business.

Even before she heard the “Ten Point Plan for Success” presented by plenary conference speaker Darrell Miller from Marks-Miller Post and Pole, the young entrepreneur had begun intuitively applying several success tenets from the presentation right away. Starting her business right, Calhoun has embraced and learned from competition and has begun involvement in trade associations and with industry experts and groups that have outdoor interests and a niche in her product. She recently attended an experiential learning conference where market potential for her product is evident and is currently exploring trade show opportunities. She is also striving to make her company name consistent with quality.”

Calhoun, creator of a successful 10-year-old company in Clancy, Montana, has advised listeners not to view competitors in the industry as enemies but rather as resources because "we are all in the same boat." There is great value in sharing ideas and garnering help to deal with issues faced within the industry. She said, “Competition is beneficial,” he added. “It keeps you on your toes and helps ensure stability. More important, lifelong friendships often evolve.” (See related Ten-Point Plan on page 8)

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Compete Smart Conference Wrap-Up (continued from previous page)

for about $3 million.

Jim Wright, Vice President of Man-
ufacturing at Semitool, explained that
in contrast to most of the company’s
competitors, Semitool is a vertically
integrated company. They make most of
their own equipment in-house in order
to improve speed-to-market, controll
cquality and give them flexibility.

“We have to have a culture that
embraces change. Most of the employees
in Montana are very competitive in the
world,” he said. “Our product develop-
tment takes days and weeks, while our
competitors take months and years. We
do n’t take change lightly.”

Wright explained the magnitude of
change faced by his indus-
try with the example that
two years ago
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Today, that
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They maintain close interaction with
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...
Darrell Miller Ten-Point Plan for Success

“I don’t believe in luck.” Darrell Miller told attendees of the recent Compete Smart Manufacturing Conference. Miller and his wife, Karen, and partners, Gary and Debbie Marks, own Marks-Miller Post & Pole, Inc., a 30-year-old business in Clancy, Montana. Owning your own business is not easy, said Miller, adding that “some things are out of your control” — at which point he displayed a picture of their entire facility under a flood in 1985. Despite such setbacks, following his ten-point plan should result in business success, he said.

Define success: What it is to you, whether financial or other; it has to be very clear in your mind.

Maintain quality: Produce a high-quality product and price it accordingly; most competitors will be at low price. Find a niche and make your name consistent with quality; it will pay off.

Control growth: Be patient, resist the temptation to take orders beyond your capabilities.

Diversify: Be very careful with this; slow, steady, helps sustainability.

Adapt & change: Don’t jump the gun but be ready for change as it’s an ever-evolving marketplace.

Resist stagnation: Very easy to become complacent; always look for a better way to do things.

Embrace competition: It is beneficial, keeps you on your toes, ensures stability.

Join trade associations: Don’t view competitors as enemies, we are all in same boat; share ideas and best practices, extra benefit in dealing with issues in your industry. Lifelong friendships can develop.

Experience vs. Attitude

Willow Creek finds that companies place too much emphasis on skills and experience, at the expense of attitude. Those attending the workshop heard that they should limit job descriptions to an emphasis on basic essential skills and more about attitude.

“Combined with the right attitude, your applicant pool will be much larger,” Steve Wilson says. “With the right mind-set, the people you hire will quickly develop specific skill in their assigned tasks. Don’t fall victim to the old, but true adage of ‘you get what you pay for.’”

Point 11 — HAVE FUN: Do what you enjoy, without personal satisfaction, you won’t be successful.

Product to Fly with President

Bright Future (continued from page 2)

Hiring Smart (continued from page 3)

In today’s hiring environment, with limited candidates applying, a robust selection system is imperative.

In point, he had the group envision a long-time postal worker going to work in a similar position at UPS — same job skills, different culture. “I think that person will be successful?” An important next step is to prescreen job applicants for ability to show up for work on time, be substance-free, work hard, and have integrity.

“Using the latest technology in behavioral analysis, your job candidate can take the web-based Step One Survey II, a 20-minute online assessment that is instantly scored,” he notes. It is highly accurate in predicting critical work behaviors. The cost is less than $25, and provides a wealth of information about a candidate before the interview.

The candidate report also provides questions that can be legally asked in the interview to explore areas of concern. The assessment calculates “distortion,” an indicator of how frank and consistent the candidate was in answering the questions; he explains. You can download a complete sample report at www.willowcc.com, or contact Willow Creek for a free trial assessment.

Willow Creek also offers a downloadable 57-question survey for those interested in incorporating attitude into job analysis. It takes about 10 minutes to complete. Return the completed survey and get a job analysis report that shows the characteristics of a successful employee for your company — how they think, their behaviors and interests — a complete description (skills and attitude) of the employee who is suited to your job before you begin the search.

Other important steps are needed for the new art of hiring smart. Wilson highly recommends background screening and warns of a new danger, “negligent hire.”

“For $50 to $60, with a one-day response, you can have social security number verification, education verification, reference verification, criminal record check and driving history,” he says. “If the job involves handling company money, run a credit history, as well.” Willow Creek offers a number of services to help employers adopt a systematic and effective hiring process to increase the probability of making a good hiring decision from 1 in 3 to better than 8 in 10. For the typical cost of a few hundred dollars per hire, costly hiring mistakes can be avoided, reducing turnover and increasing your profits.

Steve Wilson is president of Willow Creek Consultants, which specializes in teaching companies how to use a seven-step system to build a high-performance organization. He is also the founder of Mid State Technical, an INC 500 engineering services firm in the Midwest.

www.willowcc.com

Steve Holland, MMEC Director

Helicopters that regularly fly the President of the United States from place to place will soon carry the high quality medical transport bedding system manufactured by Polson, Montana company, Doctor Down. The prestigious order for six “Rescue Wraps” was announced at the recent MMEC Compete Smart conference by Bob Ricketts, Doctor Down CEO, who was the featured speaker and entertainer at the closing luncheon. His company also has the distinction of being MMEC’s 1,000th project recipient, receiving assistance from MMEC and its partner program MTECH since last year when orders for its products began to snowball.

Montana Manufacturing Center

Hiring Smart

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Forward Focus is a Newsletter for Montana Manufacturers Published Quarterly
SEND NEWS BRIEFS For the MFG NEWS! Feel free to contact MMEC about manufacturing topics or issues that concern you and send your company news briefs to dnash@coe.montana.edu

Call MMEC 406-994-3812 or 1-800-MEP-4MFG

Manufacturing News
Video to Air in 100 Countries
In November, TowHaul Corporation, a Montana company based in Belgrade, was featured on CNN in a segment for the show, “On the Money.”

Job Pool Stirs Excitement in Flathead
Columbia Falls Aluminum (CFAC) is expected to hire 120 workers to start up the second of its five potlines, according to the Daily Intertake in Kalispell. Historically, a large employer in the region, CFAC currently operates one potline and employs about 150 people. The plant has been running the single potline – 20 percent of its capacity – since March 2003, the article said. www.dailyintertake.com/articles/2006/11/23/news/news02.txt

Symbiotic Business in Superior
Tricon Timber Post and Pole east of Superior is a new business on the site of an old mill that closed in 1994. It joins DAW Forest Products, a more traditional mill that operates at the same location. Waste is sent across the lot to the Eureka Pellet Mill, which opened two years ago, to create value-added products. www.bighorsetimber.com

Montana Company’s Innovative Technology for Copper Recovery
Proprietary resin technology of Purity Systems of Missoula is to be used to recover approximately $3.0 million of copper in solution in Australia, according to business news from www.mat.net/news/PuritySystemsPR10-18-06 where Redbank Mines announced initiatives to recover copper in solution in the previously mined Sandy Flat operation.

Business Plans $20 Million Site for Liquid Gases
A $20-plus million plant that will make liquid nitrogen, liquid oxygen and liquid argon is planned for Lockwood, east Billings, and expects to be operational in less than 18 months. The new company, Aspen Air, will market its product to refineries, hospitals, food and beverage manufacturers and oil fields. The planned facility will include a truck loading station and employ 25-30 people. www.bighorsetimber.com

Driving Forces across Montana
For a glimpse of the driving forces behind the economies of two distinct regions of Montana, check out October and November articles from “Montana’s Economy at a Glance” on the Web: www.ourfactoryyourfuture.org

Patents Bogged Down
The complexities of today’s nanotech and other innovation along with a tight budget has created a processing backlog at the U.S. Patent Office of up to four years, according to Chicago Tribune writer Jon Van. Responding to nearly three-quarters of a million filings in the pipeline, the patent office has hired 1,200 new examiners with another 1,200 to be added in the coming years; relying on industry specialists to cut the learning curve. —Seattle Times Business Digest, Nov. 27, 2006

Students Urged to Think Big About Future
Industrial Technology students from Capital High School in Helena toured several manufacturing sites in the Gallatin Valley in November. Students explored some of the largest equipment manufactured in the state when they visited TowHaul in Belgrade. 

Engineer Dean DeCook led the group through the plant to see a 300-ton lowboy destined for a surface mining site in South America. He took them through the paint facility where a hatch more than 15 feet high was recently coated for such a hauler and on to the building that houses the CNC (computer numerically controlled) plasma cutter. This device is capable of cutting through several inches of plate steel as if it were butter.

TowHaul also manufactures water tank carriers, cable reelers and other major mining equipment. It’s monster equipment was recently featured on the CNBC program “On the Money” with Mike Hagedus. The program was entitled “Big Operations in Big Sky Country.”

“I wanted my students to visit actual businesses that are using the same skills, technology, and processes that I am teaching and they are learning in our Welding and Machining program,” said instructor Jim Weber.

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Outlook Seminars to Explore Becoming Closer Neighbors
A look at factors causing a shakeup of Montana’s typical economic trends and economic development and trade opportunities throughout Asia will be the featured topics at the 33nd annual First Interstate Bank Montana Economic Outlook Seminar.

The theme for this year’s circuit across Montana is “Rising Asia: Becoming Closer Neighbors.” The seminars are presented by the UM Bureau of Business and Economic Research. Montana professor Philip West, former director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana (U.M.), will address issues that come with rapid growth in countries like China, India and Taiwan such as rising living standards, rising consumption and rising environmental problems. As in the past, the seminar will highlight the latest economic trends and explain the shakeup as well as what it means in Montana’s key industries: manufacturing, agriculture, non-resident travel, health care, and forest products.

Bob Brown, senior fellow at U.M.’s Center for the Rocky Mountain West, will present “Perspectives from China” as the closing luncheon speaker.

All seminars begin at 8 a.m. and run through the lunch hour. Presentations are scheduled for:

Helena February 23
Great Falls January 24
Missoula January 26
Billings January 30

For costs, meeting place, and registration information visit www.bber.umt.edu or call 406-245-5131

Red Ants Pants (continued from page 4)
A larger sample, working though the process until both you and the vendor are satisfied with the result to develop a working relationship.

Phenomenal Startup Support
“There’s something about a small business taking off, that people appreciate: they get really excited. Calhoun says: “The full-on support and encouragement from everybody that I’m on to something good has been phenomenal. When you are struggling on your own, hearing a voice of wisdom really helps.”

“It’s really inspiring to see someone start a clothing business in Montana; and a woman-owned business, that’s huge.” Terwilliger notes: “Al [Deibert] and I are friends and talk all the time about manufacturing. It’s not easy today. Sarah has the heart of a lion to really do this. Any assistance she needs, she’s got it.”

In manufacturing, Calhoun is marching toward her dream of excellence, mutual benefit and making the world a better place as she outfits women in harsh working environments with durable pants that fit. Hurrah!

Students explore the undercarriage of a 300-ton TowHaul lowboy.
Upcoming Events Across Montana

Gateway to Opportunity Set for Jan 4 in Glendive
The annual “Gateway to Opportunity,” an economic development forum, has added an energy career fair along with 25 seminars to help grow business opportunities from value added ag to energy in the region. The event will take place at Dawson Community College. www.dawsoncountyed.com

COMBINED EVENT: 4th Annual Montana Aerospace Conference and Montana SBIR Conference
February 20-21, 2007, Best Western Great Northern Hotel, Helena, MT. Will include workshops on intellectual property management, ISO, and government accounting; training sessions on marketing and project management; company success stories; a technology exhibition; and lots of networking opportunities. PUT THIS ON YOUR CALENDAR!

Montana Economic Development Summit Set for Apr 30-May 1
U.S. Senator Max Baucus has announced that Microsoft founder Bill Gates and long-time NBC Nightly News anchor Tom Brokaw will headline a fourth statewide Montana Economic Development Summit in Butte on April 30 and May 1 on the campus of Montana Tech of the University of Montana. Baucus organized the first-ever statewide economic development summit in Great Falls in 2000. He held another summit the following year in Great Falls and again in Billings in 2003. This year’s theme is “innovation” and will explore ways to foster the entrepreneurial spirit in Montana and how Montanans can better market their products and ideas. The Montana Economic Development Summit is free and open to the public. As in years past, Baucus said the state’s top elected leaders – Gov. Brian Schweitzer, Sen.-elect Jon Tester and Rep. Dennis Rehberg – will be invited to co-host the Summit. Source: www.matr.net/event-1784.html

Ag & Construction Expo Jan 11-13
“Big iron and heavy equipment” will be the focus of the fifth Ag & Construction Expo (ACE - formerly the Ag Technology Show) at the MetraPark in Billings on Jan. 11-13. ACE highlights the latest in goods and services available to agriculture, construction, industrial and commercial buyers in this region. ACE has expanded into the industrial markets to showcase and display the latest in high tech products in the market place today. Admission and parking are free. www.brightcatproductions.com

MAGIE Show Jan. 18-20
MAGIE, the Montana Agriculture and Industrial Exposition is a regional trade show for the farming and ranching communities and features products and services from all over the Pacific Northwest, Montana, the Dakotas and Canada. The show is produced by KMON Radio and has over 200 exhibitors. It features major manufacturers and regional businesses.