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**BusinessWest Online**  
 THE BUSINESS JOURNAL OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS  
 Published Bi-Weekly

June 7, 2010 Edition

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**Manufacturers Seek to Forge Connections Through AMICCON**

BY JOSEPH BEDNAR



Eric Hagopian, right (with Douglas Hagopian, vice president and treasurer of Hoppe Tool), says AMICCON will benefit the area's entire manufacturing sector.

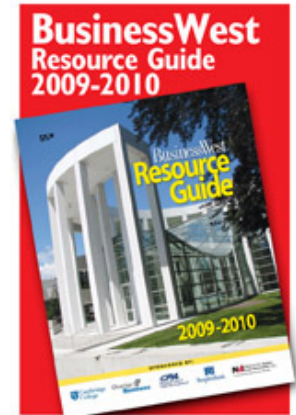
Manufacturers in Western Mass. are skilled at putting the pieces together, so to speak, to create countless products. But they haven't been as effective making connections amongst each other.

That's the driving idea behind AMICCON, or the Advanced Manufacturing and Innovation Competition & Conference, which is, nominally, a regional event set for this fall in Springfield — and yet, its organizers say, much more.

"I feel it makes sense for us to get out there and have an event where we are aggregated together, all of us — metal processing, electronics, paper manufacturing, all the different manufacturing capabilities — in one place," said Eric Hagopian, president of Hoppe Tool in Chicopee and a member of the AMICCON steering committee.

Why is that important? Hagopian and others on the committee say that, despite the richness and diversity of the region's manufacturing sector — the showcase of which is one of the conference's goals — many manufacturers and supply-chain members are not aware of all that is produced in the Springfield-Hartford corridor. As a result, they look outside this area — to other regions of the U.S. or even internationally — to supply goods that are actually being produced locally.

When that happens, Hagopian said, area manufacturers lose potential customers — and profits.



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"For us, AMICCON is a chance to be in the room with companies that we didn't know about," he told BusinessWest. "Who knows — we may be making the same mistake some of our customers are making, looking outside our region because we don't know who the manufacturers are, what their capabilities are, and how they can help us."

The conference, slated for Sept. 23 at the MassMutual Center, will focus on six key manufacturing niches: plastics and advanced materials, precision machining, paper and packaging, electronics, 'green'/clean technology, and medical devices. Business opportunities in defense and aerospace will also be highlighted. Original equipment manufacturers from around the country and members of their supply chains are being invited personally to participate.

Committee member Jeff Sattler, president of NUVO Bank, said that, while Western Mass. manufacturers must compete to survive, they also benefit when the entire sector is healthy, and to create that robustness, they need to show each other what they have to offer, along with attracting customers from outside the region.

"Manufacturers are tired of watching corporations shut down and move out," he said. "If they had a better understanding of what their supply chain is around the marketplace, maybe they wouldn't leave. That may be idealistic, but it's necessary."

Sattler said he's dealt with many manufacturers in his portfolio of commercial lending at NUVO, and he has often tried to foster business connections between them. AMICCON, he said, is a way to do so on a larger scale.

But that event is only the first phase of AMICCON, said Ellen Bemben, one of the conference founders.

"We have an ultimate goal, within five years, to turn this region into the hub for exotic manufacturing — nano, micro, precision manufacturing," Bemben said. "It's here; all we have to do is identify it and market it."

To do so will require making connections with colleges and universities to cultivate the next generation of manufacturers, by developing programs that promote what the sector has to offer, said committee member Gary Gasperack, vice president of the Spalding Division of Russell Corp.

"This is an effort by manufacturers for manufacturers," he noted. "However, the intent is also to tap into and involve the academic community in a total way — the MITs and RPIs, UMass, UConn, that whole playing field will be phase two of what we do. The conference is phase one, and phase two will deal with the education area. Phase three deals with entrepreneurs and innovations."

Part of that third phase will be something called the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Competition, which is designed to promote the sort of innovation that has lent

the Springfield area its manufacturing heritage. Companies participating in the Sept. 23 conference will help underwrite the \$50,000 prize with their entry fees.

Gasparack touted the regional component of AMICCON, which seeks to forge connections across the Massachusetts border as well as within the Bay State, noting that a manufacturing region is not necessarily defined by state lines.

"In the political arena, the players tend to be more provincial, focused more on their state's needs," he said. "We have an opportunity — because of the mission and purpose of this organization — to look beyond the borders, go beyond local jurisdictions, and pull companies together, and we believe we can be successful in a broader sense by having that focus."

Sattler agreed. "There's nothing bad about this ... if it's done right," he said. "This helps every business in the marketplace. Everyone benefits when a business comes into the region. That's the key."

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