

# THE BUSINESS NEWS

Serving Brown, Calumet, Door, Fond du Lac, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Oconto, Outagamie, Shawano, Sheboygan & Winnebago counties

October 30, 2017

www.thebusinessnewsonline.com

Vol. 15, No. 14 \$1.00

## Growth Strategies



Don Van Zeeland, left, Jeff Van Zeeland, Dale Van Zeeland and Travis Van Zeeland operate Fox Valley Wood Products, a family business started by Don and Dale's father, Norbert, in 1963. Don is Jeff's dad and Dale is Travis' dad. The Business News photo by Amanda Lauer

## Catering to needs of manufacturers

Kaukauna company found its niche making wooden pallets, crates and boxes

By Brian Neuberger

bneuberger@thebusinessnewsonline.com

Urgency, urgency and more urgency.

Within the confines of their 36,000-square-foot facility at W811 State Hwy 96 in Kaukauna, such is the rallying cry of Fox Valley Wood Products in terms of addressing and executing on the needs of their customers.

According to Jeff Van Zeeland, one of the company's owners, it is a belief which never takes a sick day.

"We manufacture wooden pallets, crates, boxes, that type of thing," said Van Zeeland, who is one of four members of the company's ownership group, alongside his father, Don, cousin Travis and uncle Dale (Travis' father). "However, we're not necessarily selling pallets and crates, we are selling our service," he said. "We offer a quick turnaround — from same day to next-day delivery — and that is what customers have come to appreciate about us. Overall, we understand success is not based on the products we build, but rather the quality and service we provide."

The service Fox Valley Wood Products provides is catering to the needs of any and all manufacturers, primarily in Northeastern Wisconsin, who can benefit from a niche that, according to Van Zeeland, has steadily grown in demand.

"I would say that the majority of our growth has come from companies that used to have an internal woodshop, where they would build their own products," said Van Zeeland, who estimates that 90 percent of the jobs he and his staff support are within a 60-square-mile radius of Kaukauna.

"However, as labor has gotten to be more and more tight, [these companies are] realizing that they're not necessarily equipped or set up to do what we do — building crates and pallets. So, they leave it to us and, in most cases, we save them significant costs."

Van Zeeland is confident that he and his staff of 45 approach customer service the right way.

"When somebody calls our office, we are going to pick up the phone and they are going to get immediate attention to whatever they need," said Van Zeeland, adding that nearly 40 percent of all jobs handled by the company are custom (based upon inside dimensions and weight constraints needed for shipping) in nature. "We don't need a whole lot of time to react. Time is money for everybody, so, collectively, we are here to help our customers in that way."

Now in its third generation of ownership, creating peace of mind for its clientele has been at the heart of Fox Valley Wood Products for more than half a century.

The business was founded in 1963 by Jeff's grandfather, Norbert Van Zeeland. Along with being a dairy farmer in rural Kaukauna, he raised pheasants for sale to sporting clubs and state conservation departments as well as restaurants. He and his six sons built their own crates for shipping pheasants.

Originally named Fox Valley Crate Company, Norbert, along with his sons, started their venture by building shipping crates in a pole shed behind their farm for Badger Northland, which enlisted their help as the company was looking to transport its products

Overall, we understand success is not based on the products we build, but rather the quality and service we provide.

— Jeff Van Zeeland, co-owner, Fox Valley Wood Products, Kaukauna

across the country.

In addition to the company name being changed to its current incarnation in 1970, the business, under the leadership of Tom, Don and Dale Van Zeeland, expanded to a 6,000-square-foot manufacturing facility on a neighboring property.

Fast forward more than 40 years later, and the steady expansion of the business has continued, most recently in the form of a lumber processing area erected in 2013, which is across the road from the company's manufacturing building.

"Our original building was a quarter of the size we have today," said Van Zeeland, who joined the company on a full-time basis in 1996 and moved into a leadership capacity four years later. "It's significant what's happened the last 20 years," he said. "We had one computer, and

that was mainly focused on accounting; bills of material were manually written out; and we had 25 employees. But, with regard to the products we supply, the just-in-time, same day requests have increased exponentially. If you are able to do it, you can be successful. If you can't, you can go backwards in a hurry."

Shipping several truckloads of product per day, Van Zeeland takes pride in the fact that Fox Valley Wood Products— which uses dense hardwood locally grown in Wisconsin, soft wood material from Canada and/or western states, and panel products and plywood — has carved a unique niche within the Fox Valley manufacturing community that continues to be needed at a high rate.

"Due in large part to word of mouth, we don't have a full-time sales person on staff," Van Zeeland said. "If we can take care of our customers and pick up a few along the way, referrals have proven to be an effective method in terms of business development."

Since joining the ranks held previously by grandfather and father (who, as of 2005, is still involved on a part-time basis), Van Zeeland is cognizant of the past and present successes of Fox Valley Wood Products, while also keeping one eye focused on what lies ahead.

"I think we've established a formula for success," he said. "Right now, more of our near term goal is labor; we just want to stay on the cutting edge on how we treat and compensate our employees. Additionally, we are looking to stay efficient on what we are currently producing and remaining lean — all of which, ultimately, will positively impact our customers."