

IT'S ALL ABOUT SIZE
By Raquel Chole – SPRINGS Magazine

MIGHTY. The word that describes springmakers across North America. Whether they are a small company with under 15 employees, a midsized company, or one of the big hitters with multiple locations, they have an impact on the industries they serve, the customers they supply to, and the communities they enrich by creating jobs and actively supporting local events and charities.

The springmakers featured in this article vary in size and serve every industry that uses a mechanical assembly. For the largest companies, automotive is a key area served; for some of the smaller springmakers, they have found a niche in specialized markets that are unique to their geographical location.

Ace Wire Spring & Form Company, Inc.
Linda Froehlich, Owner & Chief Problem Solver
McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania
acewirespring.com



Pictured (l-to-r): Ritchy, Linda and Rich Froehlich.

“My father always said: ‘Don’t do automotive!’” says Linda Froehlich, owner of Ace Wire Spring & Form Company. “They’ll own you. They want parts for the cost of wire...even when we can’t get the wire anyway.” She feels this strong statement will resonate with many small and mid-sized spring companies.

For Froehlich, midsized is a great place to be, a safe place to be, though she admits smaller might be better in times because it is so challenging to find manufacturing floor employees. The most profitable operations, she feels, are the companies with fewer than 26 employees and often these have only family involved in the business.

Froehlich says the big problem for companies like Ace is enticing young people to come into the industry. It is her fondest wish that springmaking could be seen as a career rather than just a job, as it was in days gone by, and that young high school graduates could find the satisfaction in making parts that are at the heart of every mechanical assembly.

Ace has been in business for more than 80 years and Froehlich loves the atmosphere: teamwork, family and future. “Future” because wireforms and springs will always be needed — they are the energy that moves things. She encourages employees to “stay, grow and continue on because there is always a tomorrow here. And, someone who starts here and thinks big could be an owner one day.”

Froehlich sees the Ace niche as being the jobs no one else wants. “Automotive and appliance are down and dirty industries,” she says. “What I want is the work the other guys don’t want to do. When we see a job that is in our product line, we say, ‘Yes, we can do this.’”

Some of that confidence comes from the continual investment in new equipment. Ace recently invested over a million dollars in new equipment, and through these machine acquisitions it is easy for the Ace leadership to see how technology has changed every aspect of the business. Froehlich credits the ingenuity and imagination of her team with using this new technology to create parts that translate to successful production outcomes for their clients.

It has been many years since Ace made the leap from being a small-sized manufacturer to finding their sweet spot as a midsized operation. “At one point, with my dad as the owner, we had 7 to 8 employees. By the time my husband Rich and I bought it, we had 26, and we grew it. Now our ideal number is 50 employees, and we are a little shy of that,” she explains. “We have a great team of people. My husband and I are still working, and our son Ritchy is in the business as well; some of the grandkids may come in eventually.”

Froehlich is happy they have stayed in the business during what she calls scary times in the world today. “What would Rich and I have done during the pan-demic if we didn’t have this business to go to? We can’t travel now. I’ll see Rich headed out the door on a Saturday or Sunday and I know he’s going over to Ace to see how things are going.”

Most of the pivotal decisions that moved Ace from small to medium were sales related, not in terms of entering markets, but in terms of adding sales muscle. First, they added manufacturers’ representatives to sell products on a commission basis. Later, as that produced good results, they added a sales manager who took them into the world of trade shows, which brought in high levels of desirable business. Now, their best manufacturers’ rep manages all the other reps, which takes the burden off the home team.

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One other decision resulted in game changing growth when, in the late 1970s, Ace purchased a Torin that could make up to 5/8” diameter parts. Froehlich remembers the shock of having to write a check for \$125,000 for that machine, but now realizes that was a small ticket item compared to today’s machinery price tags. Their next investment is likely to be equipment that can run 24/7, says Froehlich, echoing the sentiments of Mary-Anne Morris of Dendoff in needing more automation when shop floor employees are hard to find.



While most spring companies never get the opportunity to make a stand-alone product, Ace found success with their own invention, called the Super Clip. It is a giant paper clip that remains popular today and can be ordered at www.superclip.com. It can securely hold 100 sheets of paper and Froehlich lights up with delight when she talks about it: “Everyone who sees them loves them and wants to buy them.”

Froehlich remains optimistic for the future and is quick to remind others of the company motto: It’s always springtime at Ace. “I wish my dad could see what we’ve become today, from his beginnings in an attic to a 55,000 sq. ft. operation, with plenty of incremental growth in between.” Ace has grown, has survived a pandemic and will continue to thrive.