

Productivity 1, waste 0

By Dee DePass
Star Tribune Staff Writer

North Star Machine Co. Inc. thinks it's got the antidote to small manufacturers' struggles with inefficiencies, downtime and the global pressure to produce more with less.

Enter the "Lean Manufacturing Scoreboard" — an affordable, computerized device that the Savage company believes can give small industry the high-tech management tools needed to boost output. The device is intended to be used by blue-collar workers, machine operators and plant managers at small firms.

The industrial scoreboard, for which North Star sought a patent this month, captures each worker's product quantity, parts-per-hour output and downtime. The data is displayed on a large liquid-crystal display screen that is visible 300 feet away, is updated every three seconds and helps workers and managers identify production slowdowns quickly.

"It's a good tool for both operators and plant floor management personnel," said North Star marketing manager Tim Martin.

The idea is to provide a tool for small manufacturers who don't have the \$10,000 to \$25,000 to spend on the state-of-the-art monitoring systems regularly employed by behemoth manufacturers, he said. The industrial scoreboard costs nearly \$3,000 and differs from other systems in that it includes the downtime measurement, a critical piece of information that small compa-



Photo provided by North Star Machine Co.

The Lean Manufacturing Scoreboard, a computerized device that captures a worker's product quantity, parts-per-hour output and downtime, helped productivity at North Star Machine Co. in Savage.

nies can quickly use to make changes that improve output.

Computerized tracking tools have become increasingly important over the past 10 years as companies have made it a priority to detect waste. The results have included higher production that has helped scores of companies survive the recent manufacturing recession.

The scoreboard is a big departure for North Star Machine, a \$4.5 million-a-year firm that makes specialty tubes for gas-burning fireplaces, grills, stoves and griddles. Two and a half years ago, the company needed

a way to track its own production. The scoreboard idea was born and implemented internally, increasing output by 30 percent and cutting the need for workers from 51 to the 28.

A scoreboard was installed at three of six company workstations, which let line workers monitor their own output. The scoreboard revealed that the workers with the most monotonous jobs were slowing down right before lunch and at the end of the day.

"Production rates dropped as much as 50 percent and we didn't even realize it, without the

scoreboard," Martin said.

As a result, North Star automated those functions and didn't replace workers who quit. At the same time, production increased, with what had been five days worth of tube production coming out in just four days. The fifth day was then allocated to machine set-ups and new marketing efforts, Martin said.

"We got to the point where we realized this sign really works. Let us tell the world and sell it to other people," Martin said.

He's optimistic that sales of the machine could hit \$4 million a year by 2009.

PATENT WATCH

According to the Journal of Nanoparticle Research, **3M Co.** ranked third in the number of **nanotechnology patents** awarded between 1976 and 2002 with 809 patents. IBM Corp. ranked No. 1 with 2,092 followed by Xerox Corp. with 1,039.

NEW TO MARKET

On the lookout for identity theft

Identity theft is an increasing problem that is recognized by the Federal Trade Commission. In addition to monetary losses, victims might be subjected to long-term damage to their credit ratings.

Fair Isaac Corp., a credit rating agency that recently moved its corporate headquarters to Minneapolis, has introduced **myFICO Identity Theft Security**, a service to help consumers protect themselves against identity theft.

Fair Isaac is offering standard and deluxe versions of Identity Theft Security priced at less than \$2 per month to \$4.95 per month. The service monitors more than 400 sources of information for changes in credit history that might indicate fraud and provides a zero-deductible insurance policy that protects consumers for up to \$25,000.



Sweetening up a salty snack

General Mills' Pop Secret brand of microwave popcorn, which has 12 different varieties, is adding another variety in two flavors.

Pop Secret Crispy Glazed Premium Popcorn is being offered in Caramel and Kettle Corn flavors.

The salty snack gets a sugary makeover in the form of a "light, crispy glaze." It is available in stores nationwide with a suggested price of \$2.69 for two pouches and \$4.29 for four pouches.

Preparation takes a little more time and vigilance to achieve optimal results.

Treatment for migraine headaches

GelStat Corp. of Bloomington is a development-stage company that makes nonprescription consumer health care products. It announced last week that it has begun shipments of its first product, **GelStat Migraine**.

GelStat Migraine is for the acute treatment of migraine and migraine-like headaches. It is most effective as an early intervention medication or to prevent the progression of migraine headaches but can be used anytime during a migraine. The medicine comes in gel form and is delivered under the tongue for more efficient absorption.

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Dee DePass is at
ddepass@startribune.com.

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