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From left, Chet White, sales engineer; Rick Tillman, sales engineer; Marty Mathews, vice president of engineering; David Towle, sales engineer; Bart Meier, engineer; and Keith White, president and engineer, stand by a Radial Tipped Fan made by AirPro.

AirPro in business of producing process air

Started in 2002, Rhinelander fan and blower company continues to expand

By Lori Kaye Lodes

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Keith White started AirPro Fan & Blower Company in 2002 taking the unusual tact of establishing an industrial fan and blower manufacturing company run by engineers. Given that the company recently completed its sixth facility expansion in the last decade, it's a move that is paying off.

AirPro is a Rhinelander-based company that designs and manufactures industrial centrifugal fans and blowers to move airstreams of all types. Their industrial fans and blowers, both pre-engineered and custom, include backward inclined, backward curved, radial tipped, material handling fans, high pressure blowers, and other centrifugal fans and blowers.

"At the most basic level, we provide industrial air moving technology for process air needs of industry," said White, president of AirPro. "Look around you and the materials you see all represent material that has been produced by someone, somewhere, that usually involves process air — taking a raw material and planing it, reducing it and changing shape produces dust," he said. "Air is fluid; people use the air as the fluid in many processes to accomplish what they're doing. That's where we come in. We're the producer of that process air."

Being a company that's run by engineers is a key distinction as well. "It means we are very disciplined, very focused on internal business process and details, and very structured," White said, "and while we don't have the freedom to deviate from processes, we do operate with an attitude of freedom for employees to thrive within that structure."

"That's a key to our success," he said. "We set out on a mission to provide premier quality and premier customer service and remain committed to the disciplined steps needed to accomplish that mission."

The company's growth is a strong indicator it's hitting the mark. Less than two years after its founding, AirPro purchased an 8,500-square-foot facility seven miles north of Rhinelander. In the ensuing years, it underwent four major expansions bringing its current capacity to 50,000 square feet, expanding the shipping and receiving area, adding auxiliary space for painting and testing, increasing office space, and expanding manufacturing space. Last fall, the company purchased a second 32,000 square-foot location, AirPro West, in downtown Rhinelander in the old WPS building, marking a 2,300 percent increase in overall square footage in the past 12 years.

"Our goal is for customers to say [our product] is the best-looking fan they've ever seen and that the quality they get from AirPro is better than they've ever had," White said. "Premier, to us, means a 'wow' experience that's different than any the customer has had before."

White credits the company's premier levels not only to products made with quality materials by welders who know what they're doing and products that are long-lasting, but also that if something does happen, taking care of the situation. "From beginning to end, it's about premier service and quality," he said. "I don't often get excited about the first purchase order, but I am very excited about the second one."

To aid in delivering premier customer service, the company introduced a tool, myAirPro, which allows customers to access the same database employees use to access their products' performance data.

"This is an innovative tool for our industry," White said. "We're not primarily a metal fabricator; we're a provider of technology which includes allowing customers to access their performance data so they can do evaluations."

Customers can also access budget pricing so customers can evaluate AirPro and its technology. "When [the customer] experiences

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—Keith White, president,
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Rhinelander

“
myAirPro, they can see AirPro is different and really does have their success in mind," he said.

That customer base is not confined to any one industry. Instead, AirPro works hard to ensure that no single industry dominates its business. Fortunately, process air knows no bounds; it is part of everything from producing furniture to drywall to energy.

"What I enjoy about it," White said, "and what has made this a successful business, is that our business isn't focused on any particular market sector. So, the demand for our products tends to not be cyclical."

The company has experienced consistent, steady growth, although 2014 was a stellar year, coming in with an all-time-record 30 percent growth.

White said the industry as a whole is seeing tremendous swings in order levels, although AirPro has tended to climb in sales even when the industry was flat or even decreasing.

"We are gaining market share," White said. "Word of mouth is always powerful, but it's not the primary explanation for our growth. Marketing and our premier customer service are."

Nehemiah White, marketing coordinator, gives this example of premier customer service. "If a customer needs something that will cost five to 10 times what it costs to get somewhere else, and [their need] can be taken care of by another product, we will be honest with customers. We are willing to say, 'Here's a company that would be a good fit for you because they make a good product and will deliver what you need.' It's about making the right fit."

The flip side of that is that when that prospective customer has a custom need or a need better suited to an AirPro product — be it six months or five years later — they often call AirPro.

AirPro employees are encouraged to explore the latest technologies and incorporate them into processes. "We own and use the latest technologies as analytical tools at a level that gives us an edge in product development cycle time and the quality of results," Keith White said.

These technologies allow the company to take on custom application requests, develop a target for performance and put it before the engineering group. The engineers can then use the computer tools to do modeling so they don't have weld and build multiple different models, reducing the number of times they actually perform a physical testing cycle.

"There's a significant difference between claiming to have the tool versus using it on a daily, ongoing basis," Keith said.

Recently, a customer presented a picture of required equipment from which an engineer created a design even better than what the customer sought with the picture. "We didn't have something existing in our database, so the engineer drew up a concept, it was approved, he built it, and it was awesome," he said. "That's where the custom engineering prowess comes into play; it's one of the strengths of AirPro."